

Francis' True Secret was Choosing Christ

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At the end of the Mass celebrated at La Verna on 17 September, the Holy Father went in procession from the basilica to the Chapel of the Stigmata, where he prayed to St. Francis and then led the recitation of the Angelus. Before the Angelus he spoke to the young people who had spent the night in prayer and he strongly condemned the recent murder of the Sicilian priest, Fr. Giuseppe Puglisi. Here is a translation of the Holy Father's address.

Dear Young People,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. What has drawn you to this place which, eight centuries ago, witnessed the mystical identification between the crucified Christ and his extraordinary imitator, Francis of Assisi?

It was the charismatic figure of the Poverello that attracted you. Centuries pass, and *the Saint of Assisi speaks to us as if he were alive today*. The spiritual movement he began is like a springtime of youth which blossoms unfailingly in every generation.

And yet, in this 13th-century man's manner of living there is something so original that it could seem distant and unable to be imitated. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, he continues to exercise an incredible attraction.

The reality is that our time, alternating between victories and defeats in the struggle between hope and discouragement, is seeking *the path of a new authenticity*. With total clarity, St. Francis offers *the image of an authentic person*, of a successful person who had made peace with God, with himself, with others, and with the cosmos.

2. But what is the deepest root of this personality, the true secret of his attraction?

There is no doubt: it is his *choice of Christ*. Between the young Francis' conversation with the Crucifix at San Damiano until his identification with Christ crucified graphically expressed in the stigmata he received here on La Verna, there is his whole conversion process. In his Testament he himself recalls the "turning" point of his life. It is worth while listening again to the simple, touching prose of his account: "The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I had mercy

upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body" (Testament, 1).

Dear young people, aim for eternity

See: *the Christ* whom he listened to at San Damiano, whom he embraced in his brother the leper, *is new light for Francis*.

Is this perhaps a rejection of life? On the contrary, he is now able to enjoy it and sing its praises. His "Canticle of the Creatures," which welled up in him during a period of dreadful suffering, will not only be a wonderful prayer but also a hymn to life, to joy, to the world seen in the light of God.

Dear young people, *love life!* Love it with the depth and passion of Francis of Assisi. Love it in the beauty of nature, in the joy of friendship, in the advances of science, in the generous struggle to build a better world. Do not waste it in passing joys, in adventures without return, in an empty conformity. Look on high! Aim for eternity!

3. May Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mother of Francis, and of all saints, guide you on the path of the true joy for which your hearts long. Mary is constantly invoked by the peoples of this region with such a wealth of shrines and chapels dedicated to her. I would like to make special mention of the ancient, beautiful shrine of Our Lady of the Rock, which is located a few kilometers from here and is an important reference point for Marian devotion throughout the Casentino.

I offer a cordial greeting and a special blessing to the Dominican priests, guardians of that sacred shrine, to the contemplative women religious of the same order, who are a silent, prayerful presence in the shadow of that shrine, as well as to all those devoted to the Blessed Virgin, venerated there under the title of "Our Lady of the Rock" and "Our Lady of Darkness."

May Mary, "in tenebris Lux," enlighten the minds and consciences of people with the light of truth and love. May she especially enlighten you, dear young people, who like Francis confidently invoke the Blessed Virgin, Mother of the Church and model of her perennial youth.

At the end of the Angelus the Holy Father spoke about Fr. Giuseppe Puglisi.

In this place of peace and prayer, I cannot refrain from expressing the pain I felt when yesterday morning I heard the news that Palermo priest, Don Giuseppe Puglisi, had been killed.

I raise my voice to deplore that a priest committed to proclaiming the Gospel and to helping his brothers and sisters to live honestly, to love God and their neighbor, should be barbarically killed.

As I implore God eternally to reward this generous minister of Christ, I ask those responsible for this crime to mend their ways and to be converted.

May this priest's innocent blood bring peace to beloved Sicily. I, likewise, hope with all my heart that the message which comes to us from St. Francis will help everyone to return to God and to live in a manner consistent with honesty, respect for life, brotherhood and peace.

The Holy Father then had a few special words for the young people.

Dear Friends,

I am grateful to St. Francis for this gathering. After my great meeting in Denver with young people from all over the world, after my meeting with young people in the Baltic countries, precisely in Kaunas, Lithuania, today I am meeting you, children of this land blessed by God with the Gospel mission of St. Francis. And I hope you will have this peace, this peace which he found in Christ because Christ is our peace. My wish for you all, the young people of Italy and of the world, is that Christ will be our peace, that the future of generations, of peoples, of the world may arise from this peace which is Christ; Christ crucified and risen, humanly trampled on, humanly persecuted and condemned. In this dimension peace was not granted to him, but through this most serious injustice in human history he prepared peace for us in the deepest, most authentic, most absolute sense. Because peace with God, peace between God and humanity is the source of every kind of peace that should be established in this world. It is impossible to build anything without foundations, without this source of life in peace, because peace is the fruit of justice, the fruit of love. It is necessary to see these roots—justice, love and truth—to be able then to gather their fruit, in other words, peace. I wholeheartedly wish this for you. I could say that I wish for you, for you young people, for all brothers and sisters of this splendid, marvellous land, for everyone throughout the world, I wish this through the heart of St. Francis, the Poverello.

May Jesus Christ be praised.