

2. April 2024

The little flock

Note: Although we are in the octave of Easter, when no saints' days are usually celebrated, I would like to focus on St Francis de Paula today. If you prefer to listen to the Easter texts, you can find them in the archive:

- Meditation on the day's reading: <http://en.elijamission.net/2022/04/19/>
- Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <http://en.elijamission.net/10174-2/>

Lk 12:32-34

At that time Jesus said to his disciples: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

According to the Novus Ordo calendar, St Francis of Paola is celebrated on 2 April, and the Church has chosen this Gospel, which we have just heard, to commemorate him. This saint was born on 27 March 1416 into a poor family in Paula, a small town in Calabria, in the Kingdom of Naples. He was given the name Francis because his pious parents had asked the intercession of St Francis of Assisi for the grace of a son. It was also through his intercession that their child was saved from the threat of blindness. The parents had made the promise to place their son in a Franciscan monastery for one year, and they kept their promise when he was thirteen years old.

At that age the boy already showed a strong ascetic piety. At the end of his time in the Franciscan monastery, at the age of 15, with his parents' consent, he became a hermit. In solitude, the boy began to lead an austere life like that of the ancient desert fathers. He slept on a rock and ate only herbs and roots that he gathered or received from kind people. He had spent four years in total solitude and strict austerity when he was joined by two pious men who wanted to share his life of penance.

As soon as news of the hermits' life of self-denial spread among the people of the region, they rushed to build them cells and a small chapel. A priest from the parish where they

lived began to celebrate Mass for them, hear their confessions and give them Holy Communion.

As more and more people joined them, St Francis of Paola founded the Order of Minims, also known as the Paulines. He adopted the Rule of St Francis of Assisi. In addition to the usual three vows, he added a fourth: to abstain from all meat and animal products.

The order began to spread. Many miracles were attributed to St Francis of Paola, and until his old age he looked after the various foundations that were being created for the glory of God.

We see, then, that our Lord continues to raise up saints who are called to proclaim a message to the world and to reflect God's presence in a special way. Here we can feel the concern of our Heavenly Father for humanity, which He, by His grace, wants to lead into His Reign. The light emanating from St Francis of Paola reached many people. Although he would have liked to spend his life as a hermit, in silence and alone with the Lord, he followed the guidance of God, who wanted to put this light under a bushel to enlighten many (Mt 5:15) and bring them back to the Father's house.

In the Gospel of the feast of this saint, the Lord speaks of a "little flock". He is referring to those who follow Him with all their heart, who are ready to give themselves completely to Him and to respond to Him without reserve. Not all of us are called to do this in the way of St. Francis of Paola, but the saints are always an invitation to ask ourselves if we too are ready to "sell everything" in order to acquire that treasure that does not diminish and is kept safe in heaven. We know that, at the end of the day, our good works are the only thing we will take with us.

In our times, which are marked by great confusion and apostasy, even within the Church, the "little flock" certainly refers to those who, in the midst of darkness, remain faithful to the Lord without being deceived. This requires the courage of faith that characterised the saints of our Church. It is not easy to swim against the tide; it is not easy today to call sin by its name, in a world in which the awareness of sin is disappearing more and more, and in which even the killing of innocent children, as recently happened in France, the "first-born daughter of the Church", is elevated to the status of a "human right". It is not easy to stand firm when firm adherence to the

commandments of God and the holy tradition of the Church is labelled as rigorism. Seeing the anti-Christian spirit spreading among nations and poisoning peoples is not easy.

It is precisely in these times that we are called to make the "good confession" of our faith (cf. 1 Tim 6:12) without shirking. It was the Risen Lord, whom death could not hold, who sent His disciples to lead people back to the heavenly Father. However small the flock may be, the Kingdom has been given to it as long as it remains faithful to the One who loves it.

We need the zeal and unconditional response of those whom the Church presents to us as saints. They are not only models, they are "allies" who help us to be light in the midst of a world in which the apocalyptic "birth pangs" are already manifesting themselves. They are on the side of the "little flock" so that they can take spiritual responsibility and intercede for those who have gone astray.