

27th Sun (A)

4th October 2026

‘*Il Poverello*’

Is 5: *What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?*

Ps 79: *Visit this vine and protect it.* Phil 4: *the peace of God which passes all understanding.* Mt 21: 33–43: *the parable of the vineyard tenants.*

The best homily I ever preached was in my first year as a priest, on Monday 21st August 2000. We had just completed the World Youth Day 2000 with Pope (St) John Paul II, alongside 2 million other young people at *Tor Vergata* on the edge of Rome in the heat of a Roman August. The day after, we had a day trip — 2 coach loads of us from the North London district of the diocese — to Assisi, before we began our long homeward journey on the Tuesday. We were to have Mass in the crypt of the Assisi basilica, where St Francis’s remains are interred in the stone niche above the altar; and I was asked to preach. I don’t remember exactly what I said, but I know that I drew a comparison between the adopted poverty of St Francis in the 13th c., and the adopted poverty of the WYD pilgrims in the slum city of 2 million scattered across that *Tor Vergata* hillside the day before — our temporary giving up of the usual domestic luxuries for sleeping out under the stars,

receiving handouts of food parcels and water, enduring makeshift washing and latrine facilities, and yet ... how joyful ... how joyful we were in that simplicity, the poverty we had voluntarily taken on even just for 1 night. We had briefly experienced a huge freedom and closeness to God through divesting ourselves of the trappings of modern life, in this almost ‘refugee-camp’ existence where we knew what it meant to be poor, dependent, close to nature, but so united with the lovers of Christ who lived an itinerant lifestyle dependent on the charity of others. “*Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head,*” remember?

So, Assisi was absolutely the best place to spend the day after WYD, the home town of *Il Poverello*, to reflect on the meaning of that WYD experience with Pope JP II. My homily was the best one I have ever preached ... at least I think so, but (OK!) I’ve no notes, no text, no witnesses to attest to it!! ... It felt good at the time! For sure Assisi has an awesome, almost magical, ambience, given it by the spirit of St Francis; please God you will get

there one day! Some of you students, I know, have been there this year, to honour him — and even to venerate his briefly exposed relics — for 2026 is a great Franciscan jubilee year: 800 yrs ... *800 yrs yesterday* since his *transitus* on 3rd October 1226, his going to God in gentle submission to “Sister Bodily Death,” and his feast day is today: that’s good enough reason for me to preach about St Francis ... I can’t promise it’ll be my best homily ever!

I would like to speak about *3 aspects of St Francis’s remarkable life*, and draw connections with the Gospel parable of today, the workers in the vineyard, whose fruits might almost remind us of those sun-baked Umbrian hillsides near Assisi which themselves still drip with sweet wines as they did 8 centuries ago.

First, then, back to **poverty**. In the cycle of Gospel parables of Jesus in St Matthew’s later chapters, we hear today of these avaricious vineyard tenants. They have the gift of this land to work, rich productive land. It’s not theirs, they are stewards not owners, but it’s theirs to work in and make good use of, as co-operators with the Master.

Yet they go way beyond that, assume it’s all theirs for the having, and decide to ignore where these resources truly come from. They get caught up in a love for the rich produce above any love for the Master. St Francis himself inherited a life of relative luxury from his successful cloth-merchant father, and could have had a life of ease by mediaeval standards. But that wasn’t to be the life of Francis of Assisi. There were a number of mini-conversions, including — a bit like we had in 2000 — an experience of poverty on pilgrimage to Rome; plus an encounter with lepers whom he kissed as he gave alms; the hearing of Jesus’s voice from the *S. Damiano* crucifix asking him, “re-build My Church.” It culminated in his dramatically divesting himself of his rich apparel in the presence of the bishop, laying it at his father’s feet, and standing naked before them, a sign of his utter conversion from luxury to poverty. In due course he would adopt the simplest rough tunic of a beggar, and bare-footed would beg for his upkeep, meanwhile devoting himself to literally ‘rebuilding the Church,’ beginning with the ruined church

of *S. Damiano*, and the *Portiuncula* chapel down on the plain below Assisi. St Francis's new life, and that of his followers, the *fratres minores*, 'little brothers,' was henceforth to be utterly committed to poverty as mendicant friars, not owning property, relying on the alms of others: a radical conformity with Christ in not allowing possessions to come between them and the love of the Master.

The second lesson of St Francis's life is about **violence and suffering**. The vineyard workers of the parable descend from the grave sin of avarice to the graver sin of inhumane violence, in fact to murderous acts — and ultimately to the killing of the Master's son, as if by his murder they could illegitimately inherit his realm, a clear reference to the killing of the Son of Man, ousted from His domain, His very own Creation. St Francis himself experienced violence as a young soldier in the central Italian wars (1202AD), and was immediately imprisoned and fell gravely ill. He had considered that being a knight was a pursuit of great honour, yet it was precisely this early skirmish with the horrific reality of war that began his

conversion to peace. His simple Christian bravery was manifested when, 10 years into the foundation of the Franciscan order, he made a visit (1219AD) to the 'front line' of the Fifth Crusade in Egypt, where preached to the Sultan and forged some degree of understanding between them, though he also contracted a debilitating eye disease which led to another level of physical suffering for him as a result. Late in life, just two years before he died, 17th September 1224, he received a very different set of bodily injuries — not war wounds from battle, but the very marks of Jesus's Crucifixion. Whilst at prayer in La Verna, he saw a vision of a Seraph, an angel of God, and gained that mystical union with the sacrificed Christ of the *stigmata* in his hands, side, and feet. These signs of the brutal violence meted out on the Prince of Peace on Mt Calvary, were to remain with St Francis the rest of his life; they bled and were painful, a sharing in His sacred sufferings. St Francis stands as a great witness to peace, and to the inhumanity of war — he was willing to suffer bodily himself for an adherence to Christ who came to serve and not be served,

to suffer and not to cause suffering. Assisi in our own day has hosted many an event for peace, co-ordinated by the Pope, for faith leaders to express together that violence is the antithesis of belief in the divine.

The third lesson to draw from St Francis is the joy he found in simple **evangelization**. In His parable, Jesus speaks of replacing the avaricious, murderous tenants of His kingdom with others more suited to “producing the fruits.” St Francis’s conversion away from luxuries, his rejection of violence and acceptance of personal hardships, were all ordered to the preaching of the Kingdom. “*Go build my Church,*” as Jesus had mystically commanded him, spread from restoring a few local dilapidated chapels, to re-vitalizing the whole faith of the local people. Within a short while after adopting the rough Franciscan habit he had a band of followers from amongst the young men of Assisi; and by 1212AD he had inspired and been joined by St Clare before she’d even quite reached her 18th birthday! This Catholic youth movement had a profound effect on the religious life of the region, and far beyond. It

impressed Pope Innocent III in Rome when St Francis sought papal approval for his new style of religious life. Against all expectations, and against much advice, the Pope gave approbation in 1210AD (so early!) to the Franciscan way of life: their street preaching and their humbly imitating the life of Christ in order to evangelize and lead people back to Church, and to the Holy Eucharist which St Francis venerated with the most profound respect.

On this feast of St Francis “800,” we embark on a new academic year at our colleges and in our Chaplaincy: what better heavenly patron to call on than he, to help us be “**poor in spirit,**” to be “**peacemakers,**” to accept the **sufferings** that the Lord may send us to train us in spiritual discipline, and to engage joyfully in the simple **evangelization** of others by the manifest way we hold firm to that same faith that transformed Assisi: faith in Jesus, the divine Word, who asked Francis “*Go, rebuild My Church.*” Francis’s response, the last words of his great Canticle, *Laudato Si’*: “*Praise and bless my Lord, and give Him thanks, and serve Him with great humility.*”