



Artist unknown: St. Francis Weeping, 13th century

SISTER SICKNESS AND DEATH

Have on hand: O.F.S. Rule

Our Opening Prayer:

“... we hope to enjoy for ever the fullness of your glory ...”¹

Someone should read from our *Rule*, Articles #19 and #24.

In the last years of his life, St. Francis wrote his *Canticle of the Creatures*, that all of creation gives praise to God. And later he added these words, since death and dying are a part of the life of every creature:

“Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.

Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.”²

In *The Assisi Compilation* we find: “Another time during those days, a doctor from the city of Arezzo, named Good John, who was known and familiar to blessed Francis, came to visit him in the bishop’s palace. Blessed Francis asked about his sickness saying: ‘How does my illness of dropsy seem to you, Brother John?’ ...

“The doctor said to him: ‘Brother, by the grace of the Lord, it will be well with you.’ For he did not want to tell him that he would die in a little while.

“Again blessed Francis said to him: ‘Tell me the truth. How does it look to you? Do not be afraid, for, by the grace of God, I am not a coward who fears death. With the Lord’s help, by His mercy and grace, I am so united and joined with my Lord that I am equally as happy to die as I am to live.’

“The doctor then told him frankly: ‘According to our assessment, your illness is incurable and you will die either at the end of September or on the fourth day before the Nones of October.’ Blessed Francis, while he was lying on his bed sick, with the greatest devotion and reverence for the Lord stretched out his arms and hands with great joy of mind and body and said to his body and soul: ‘Welcome, my Sister Death!’”³

As found in Thomas of Celano’s writings: “Great was his [Francis’] compassion towards the sick and great his concern for their needs. If lay people’s piety sent him tonics he would give it to the others who were sick even though he had greater need of them. He had sympathy for all who were ill and when he could not alleviate their pain he offered words of compassion. He would eat on fast days so the weak would not be ashamed of eating, and he was not embarrassed to go through the city’s public places to find some meat for a sick brother.

“However, he also advised the sick to be patient when things were lacking and not stir up a scandal if everything was not done to their satisfaction. Because of this he had these words written in one of the rules: ‘I beg all my sick brothers that in their illness they do not become angry or upset at

God or the brothers. They should not anxiously seek medicine, or desire too eagerly to free the flesh, that is soon to die and is an enemy of the soul. Let them give thanks for all things and let them desire, however, to be as God wills them to be. For God teaches with the rod of punishment

and sicknesses those whom he has destined to eternal life as he himself has said: “Those I love, I correct and chastise” (*Rv 3:19*).”⁴

Around the year 1220, St. Francis wrote in *A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*: “Brother Francis, your little and looked-down-upon servant in the Lord God, wishes health and peace to all mayors and consuls, magistrates and governors throughout the world and to all others to whom these words may come.

“Reflect and see that the day of death is approaching. With all possible respect, therefore, I beg you not to forget the Lord because of this world’s cares and preoccupations and not to turn away from His commandments ...

“When the day of death does come, everything they think they have shall be taken from them.”⁵



François-Léon Benouville, St. Clare Receiving the Body of St. Francis, 1858

Q1. What impression is created by St. Francis calling death his “sister”? How did Francis face death? What was his mindset?

Q2. How does Francis of Assisi’s attitude to sickness and death compare to my own? – or to the Catholic Church’s?

Q3. Why do we act sometimes as if it’s not right that we should be getting sick?

Q4. What virtues does St. Francis ask us to practice when we are sick? (See quote from Celano.) Do I?

Q5. Do I sometimes have the idea that sickness is a punishment for having done things wrong? Some say: if I do not picture myself as a big sinner, why should I be suffering this way? Reflect on Jesus’ powerful message to the apostles: “Jesus answered, ‘Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him’” (*Jn 9:3*).

Q6. How does the Mass (and Baptism?) prepare me for death? And for resurrection?

Q7. In facing the trials of pain and cancer and other diseases, it is a natural question that arises in serious illness: “Why me”? And how do I answer?

Q8. Stated at the end of the *Apostles’ Creed*: “I believe in ... the resurrection of the body.” Do I really believe this and how do I prepare for it?

N.B. Did you know that a plenary indulgence can be gained under the usual conditions, at the time of our dying? As Pope St. Paul VI wrote: “To the faithful in danger of death who cannot be assisted by a priest to bring them the sacraments and impart the apostolic blessing with its attendant plenary indulgence Holy Mother Church nevertheless grants a plenary indulgence to be acquired at the point of death, provided they are properly disposed and have been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime.” (*Manual of Indulgences, Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, p. 147, #18.)

In the *Catechism*, read especially §2278 – §2279; for further readings: §2258 – §2330.

¹ *Roman Missal*, from Eucharistic Prayer III

² FA:ED, *Canticle of the Creatures*, 1225, Vol. I, p. 114, vs. 12-14

³ FA:ED, *The Assisi Compilation*, 1244-1260, Vol. II, pp. 203-204: 100

⁴ FA:ED, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul: Second Book*, 1245-1247, Vol. II, pp. 359-360, Chapter CXXXIII, v. 175

⁵ FA:ED, *A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*, 1220, Vol. I, p. 58, vs. 1-4