

Dear brothers and sisters,

Let us gather together in prayer, giving thanks to our Heavenly Father for the Mystery of our Salvation and for each and every gift that every day we receive from His goodness.

This is the second time that I can reach you with a letter via social media. I am very grateful for this opportunity that modern technology gives us to stay in touch; and I am happy to share some information about the situation that we are living in, along with some thoughts about our Faith.

Probably you heard that we entered a new phase of our journey to prevent the spreading of the Covid-19 virus, also known as Coronavirus. You may find the latest information on this website:

https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/?utm_source=halifaxtoday.ca&utm_campaign=halifaxtoday.ca&utm_medium=referral#alerts

The Provincial Government is now forbidding gatherings larger than five people, and for this reason the Archbishop asked us to keep our churches closed. It is a big step going into a more significant social distancing.

I understand that this is a struggle; it is for me. A few people came last week to pray silently in our four beautiful churches and I made sure to be present, at least during the weekend in two of them, praying with the faithful.

I thought that was a good way for me to let you know that I am here and that, within myself, also Jesus Christ is present; He Who decided to use such a poor servant like me to be present among His People.

Now unfortunately, this possibility has been suspended. I feel sad about it, but I also recognize the need for implementing these new measures, for the sake of our safety and everybody else's too.

We need to be patient and keep praying. As I mentioned to you last week, we are walking in the desert, like the People of Israel. They trusted in God, and He led them to the Promised Land. That's why we are called to trust in the same way, so that God may bring us safely to the end of the danger of this sickness. Hopefully, it won't take us forty years to get there! (I am kidding!!!)

As we reflected upon last week, besides the chance of being good and responsible members of our society, this could be also an opportunity to deepen our Faith, maybe rediscovering at home some old and simple ways to live as Christians, little ways are maybe forgotten in the fast pace and busyness of the modern world.

I am talking in particular about praying the rosary at home, maybe together with our loved ones for those who live with them and blessing ourselves before our meals.

I believe that some people already do both things regularly, but I am also thinking about those who are not used to them any longer, or maybe didn't get to know what they are about, maybe simply because their family's tradition was different.

My advice is to think about it and, if we feel comfortable enough, let's give it a try. It doesn't need to be anything complicated. I know that for some people it's important to have things done right and properly; but for what concerns myself, I usually keep everything simple, at least at the start.

Actually, this could be a wonderful occasion for me to start again to pray to our Mother Mary more faithfully.

I remember when I started to pray the rosary and to bless myself before lunch and supper. I have to confess that I felt a little uncomfortable at the beginning, but with time it just became so natural that now it feels strange, if I don't do it.

When I started to pray the rosary, I was told to look on the internet to find all the instructions, and I could find lots of resources and useful information. And yet, at the beginning, it was too much. So, what I did was only to pray one Our Father and ten Hail Mary, five times. That was it. Simple as that. Only after I discovered within myself the grace coming from prayer, I was able to follow the other instructions that I found.

About the blessing before the meals, surprisingly it was even more complicated. The reason is that other people could see me. It took me a while to overcome the sensation of being looked at, especially by those who didn't share my Faith or who had a different tradition.

The best way I found for myself was just to make silently the Sign of the Cross, no extra prayers, no other words. After a while, it became so inconspicuous that people wouldn't feel uncomfortable with me doing it, and I felt comfortable, too.

Now it is a beautiful tradition of the Franciscans brothers (and sisters, too) to bless our meals, every time when we are together, and also when we are alone. Normally it doesn't add flavour to the food... but it is a wonderful sign that the food that God provides on our table and our gathering together for a meal are sacred because both things come from His Love.

Wouldn't these signs be an amazing grace in all our homes?

Just think about it. This could be an opportunity to make all of us grow as "domestic churches", which means the Holy Church present and living within our homes.

This past Sunday the Liturgy spoke about Jesus Christ healing a man born blind, one of the many beggars on the streets of Jerusalem.

It is a very interesting and tricky page of the Gospel. The story speaks about a person who was blind and that was cured by Jesus. And yet reading through, we can discover that there are many other people who cannot see (even without knowing it!) and that are in need of being healed in their sight. Among them are the same disciples of Jesus, the crowd, the parents of the man born blind and the Pharisees.

What is the context of this story? In this part of the Gospel of John, we find Jesus in Jerusalem and, as He was walking among the crowd, he saw a blind man. Wanting to heal that man, Jesus spat on the ground, made a little bit of mud, and put the mud on the man's eyes. At that time saliva was thought to have some special healing capability ...He didn't actually spit on that poor man's eyes!!!

Jesus asked the man to go to wash himself in one of the pools of Jerusalem, and after he did, he was miraculously able to see again.

As soon as the blind man started to see again, immediately it followed a variety of conversations with people who couldn't believe what had happened, or who didn't want to recognize it or to admit it.

Despite the miracle and the great joy of being able to see again, the man who received back his eyesight, started to go through a great struggle, not being recognized by the people who knew him, being questioned and accused by the Pharisees, being even left unsupported by his parents during the questioning.

The amazing thing is that slowly, in the midst of all the difficulties, this man acknowledged the incredible grace that God granted him, and at the end of all the story, he was able to confess his Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflecting on this page of the Gospel, I believe that at its beginning everybody is blind, knowing it or not, except for Jesus Christ. At the end of it, both Jesus Christ and the man born blind can see.

This is the journey of the disciple that receives the gift of light in Baptism. Light, in fact, is what allows us to see when we are in darkness. All of us are on this journey. This is a journey that is already accomplished in us by the grace of the Sacrament of Baptism; but it is also a journey that we are growing into, as we learn to love, trust and follow Jesus Christ. The more we do that, the more the eyes of our souls get opened.

And what about the others? Well, all the others are blind, including the disciples whose eyes are getting opened but are not opened yet. It will take a long way for them to be able to see, only after the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ!

The disciples, in fact, looking initially at the man born blind, asked Jesus if that man was blind because of his sins or the sins of his parents. In this, I observe their blindness and the lack of understanding of who God is. From what they say, it can be understood that God is someone who takes revenge over those who sin. This is not the God that Jesus

Christ revealed to us. It is not the Loving Heavenly Father Who is slow to anger, rich in Mercy and steadfast in Love.

About the crowd, it's interesting that they couldn't agree if the man being healed was really the one who was begging. Some said: "It is he!"; others said: "No, it is someone who looks like him!". Therefore, I ask myself: "Did anybody look at this man when he was begging for help? Did anybody see him?". How is that possible that those people couldn't agree on who this man is?

About the Pharisees, there is no doubt that they don't see and they don't want to see. They were teachers of the Faith in Israel, but they couldn't accept Jesus Christ healed that man. It is true that the healing happened on a Sabbath, when every work was forbidden. But is it possible that not even a small doubt came to their minds about God performing an act of Mercy, through Jesus? Their blindness is in the fact that they cannot see that God can be Merciful, and that in His Mercy, He can overcome the same Law that He gave.

Finally, we need to say two words about the parents of this man. They were called by the Pharisees to witness to the fact that this man was born blind and to answer as to what they thought happened to him. They were so afraid of the Pharisees that they acknowledged the man as their son, but couldn't (or wouldn't) say anything about the miracle that gave the eyesight back to that man. Their answer was: "He has the age. He will answer for himself". They were so afraid that they didn't want to be involved. Sometimes fear can really make us blind, even in front of those that we love the most.

What do we learn from all this story?

I learn that, as a baptized, I am on a journey of Faith. On this journey, my spiritual sight is gradually restored. I do believe that the eyes of my soul are actually opened in Baptism, but I also like to think that it takes a lifelong to attune the eyes of my soul with the eyes that I use every day.

Maybe we can call it a lifelong journey of conversion; a conversion from blindness to the ability to see in the same way that God sees all of us and the world.

Let us pray, my brothers and sisters, that the Lord will lead us in this journey, helping us to open eyes of prayer to look at the beauty of Creation, and eyes of Charity to look at the beauty of ourselves, and of all our brothers and sisters.

I will write you again soon. In the meantime, please, pray for me, as I will pray for you.

May the Lord bless you and protect you along with all those whom you love,

Fr Francesco