

Saint Frances of Rome
(Judith 8:2-8 / Luke 2:36-38)
09.03.2022

Between Judith and Anna and the saintly woman we celebrate today (Saint Frances of Rome) there are common character traits, rooted in and stemming from what we could call the fundamental relationship of their lives: that which they enjoyed with the Living God. All these women served God night and day, giving themselves continually to prayer. It was from their unceasing commitment to prayer that these three women drew the strength they needed to help them live up to the challenges life threw their way. It was by prayer that these three women were fortified – strengthened by the power of God’s grace at work within them: the power of the Spirit which established them as witnesses to the Lord’s work in His people’s favour. The fact that the lives of these three women were all steeped in prayer leads me to want to reflect with you upon the importance of prayer in our lives today as we strive to bear testimony to Christ-Jesus, in whom we recognise God to be alive and at work in today’s world.

Clearly the Church’s intention in having us read the Gospel text which depicts Anna at prayer in the Temple – and in that prayer encountering Christ and being led to speak of Him to all who passed by – wants to help us situate Saint Frances of Rome as a woman of prayer. It also surely wants us to understand her life and mission from a prophetic optic. I see it as a bid to help us grasp the relevance of prophetism rooted in prayer for the Church of our own day and age.

For the benefit of those who join us for our celebration this morning, who may not know much about Frances of Rome – who may even ignore totally who she was, perhaps I should explain in a few words just who this saint was.

Frances is a saint of our monastic family of Saint Mary of Monte Oliveto. She lived in the years spanning the 14th and 15th centuries. She was a wife and mother who lived first as a secular oblate of our Roman monastery of Santa Maria Nova and then later in widowhood as a nun of the community of Tor de Specchi which she had founded. The Sisters of this Religious House lived their communal life as oblates of the monks’ monastery of Santa Maria Nova.

Now a little word about what she represented for others in her day. From this we can deduce her significance for our own day and age. To begin with for the people of Rome.

Frances is regarded as a patron of the eternal city. In St Peter’s basilica there is a towering statue of her overlooking the Chair of St Peter. It is perched high above a statue of St Gregory the Great, no less. This testifies to the esteem in which she was held and the marked importance of her testimony. She is depicted as being ranked as important for Rome as one of the greatest of all her Bishops: Pope St Gregory the Great! Frances’ relevance extended far beyond the confines of the city of Rome, however. Her impact upon the Council of Florence was great, for example. She lived and worked and prayed for the healing of the great schism between East and West. She encouraged the Bishop of Rome to do all he could to bring about the unity which Christ desired (desires!) for His Church. She influenced the pope of the day Eugene IV – reminding him of the supreme importance of listening to the prophetic voices of the Religious among his counsellors, over and beyond the political reasoning and manoeuvring of certain cardinals within his entourage. Frances was well and truly a prophetic figure in all this.

The choice of the Gospel scene of Anna proposed for her feast underlines this aspect of her life. It helps us see Saint Frances of Rome as a prophetic woman of prayer at the heart of the Church of her time: a prophetic woman of prayer whose whole life and way of being spoke of God... precisely because she continually spoke to God in incessant prayer. In this respect, Frances remains a woman whose witness is relevant for our day and age, as indeed for all times.

Frances of Rome, was a person with a strong ecclesial sense. She was a woman of the Church. She saw God present and at work in the life of His people. Drawing on her example, I dare to say that we are called at this time to see the importance of women in the life of the Church. Unfortunately, too often this has been overlooked. It seems to me that Frances' memory is one that Church would do well to revive at a time when she is seeking to give women a more prominent and meaningful role to play in the whole area of governance of God's Holy Faithful People, in the central offices of the Roman Curia.

If I believe that we could look at a whole host of things in the life of this very interesting woman – Frances, drawing forth from her life a multiplicity of lessons, this morning I will content myself to concentrate particularly upon just one aspect of Frances' testimony: the aspect of prophetic prayer.

Frances speaks to us of the importance of prayer and the importance of prophecy. She speaks to us of prayer as prophecy. It might be a new insight for some of us that prayer – fidelity to prayer – can be and is something prophetic. Some might ask: In what way is prayer prophetic? I believe fidelity to prayer speaks to us prophetically of the importance of perseverance in our attentiveness to God.

The Temple setting for Anna's prayer, in the Gospel passage read for today's Solemnity, has me think of a particular aspect of Frances' prayer that should be part of all genuine prayer; an attitude of generous self-surrender, or total self-offering. The Temple was the setting where the People of God made such offerings. Frances clearly strove to live her life as an oblation: a gift to God which held nothing back. She lived her consecration in an attitude of unreserved obedience to the will of God. She sought to be accorded to God's will with her whole heart... as Christ-Jesus was.

Paul wrote to the Romans words that are applicable to all of us when he invited them to become a living sacrifice of praise; to make of their lives a generous oblation; a complete self-giving sacrifice. Frances did that. She lived her whole existence as an oblation. Her example should inspire us to do the same. Prayer (which was such a hallmark of Frances's life) speaks to us ultimately of self-offering to God, for prayer is an expression of our self-offering. Prayer is a surrender of one's life and energies – a consecration of – all one's activities into God's hands. For this reason, I believe it can legitimately be said therefore that the practice of prayer of itself is a word of God to our world today. It is a prophetic word which speaks of the supremacy of God: His lordship over all.

Just as Anna's prayer and her reaction to the child Jesus in prayer was a confirming, encouraging word for the young couple, Mary and Joseph, who brought their infant Jesus to the Temple, so Frances' prayer and her attention to the reality of her time in her intercession, for the Church and for the world, was for so many around her a word of God for them. It was a word that spoke to them of the Lord's compassion. Like Jesus, the man of prayer par excellence – the great prophet through whom God visited His people, Frances of Rome also went about doing the good. She walked in God's presence, her life wrapped in prayer. She expressed her communion and solidarity with all in need, just as Jesus did in His lifetime.

Frances' prayer led her to speak and make known her vision of all things concerning them to those around her, including the Church authorities with whom she was never shy to share the insights she gained through her prayer for the well-being of the Church in the time of turmoil and crisis in which she lived.

We celebrate this feast of St Frances at a time of great turmoil and crisis in the world – a time of great turmoil and crisis for the Church the world over. I believe this time of crisis can and should be lived as a time in which to engage ourselves anew in the way of conversion. This is the only way that will lead us to experience that communion with the Lord Himself, within ourselves and with each other, to which God calls us.

This a time in which there is great need for renewed engagement on behalf of all the faithful to labour for the unity of the broken body of Christ. We need greater unity within the Catholic Church herself and between her and all the Churches. In this regard, might I suggest that a little attention paid to the life and witness of Frances of Rome would be beneficial? I believe that it could and should inspire us. It could and should give us some insights and help us to discern a way forward in our day – a way forward that we are called to take ourselves and also lead others to take with us.

The memory of Saint Frances of Rome should convince us of the vital role prayer plays in the life and in the renewal of the Church. Saying that, I find myself thinking of a few lines of a twentieth century monastic: Thomas Merton. He someone who like Frances was attentive to the conflicts and efforts at Church renewal in his day (including the Church's renewed engagement to work for ecclesial unity). Writing in *Contemplation in a World of Action* Merton had this to say: Prayer and meditation have an important part to play in opening up new ways and new horizons. If our prayer is the expression of a deep and grace-inspired desire for newness of life – and not the mere blind attachment to what has been familiar and “safe” – God will act in us and through us to renew the Church by preparing, in prayer, what we cannot yet imagine or understand. In this way our prayer will and faith today will be oriented toward the future which we ourselves may never see fully realised on earth. To my eyes and understanding those lines really match and tie in with Frances' vision and her life experience referred to above.

May Frances' encouraging example be a prophetic word for all of us today! May it see us, following her example, engaging ourselves in steadfast, hope-filled prayer for the renewal of the Church and for peace and stability in our world!