

Laudato Si' 2020

Theme: "Everything is Connected"

A 9 day Retreat

16 – 24 May 2020



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Capuchin GEM (Green Environment Movement) – JPIC Office - OFM Capuchins

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace and Good.

To commemorate the 5th year anniversary of Laudato Si', we invite you to join us in a 9 day retreat.

Each day, we will provide you with materials from which you can find inspiration. We will end each session with a short reflection. All that is required of you is to provide yourself a few minutes each day to find a quiet place to read and reflect in peace.

For today, Day 2, we will have two topics:

- (1) The Touches of God
- (2) The Temples of the Lord

Happy reading and God bless you always!

Office of the JPIC, OFM Capuchins

I. Material 1: The Touches of God

When I was about three to four years old, my father, who was an Air Force doctor, was assigned to a Radar Station at the top of a mountain range somewhere in the Philippines. My playground back then was an undulating landscape of mountain slopes with a mantle of green grass that sway under a deep blue sky. I often enjoy the caress of the wind on my face and when it rains, the mud puddles become my swimming pools.

There was a small chapel in the military base where people gather, especially on Sundays, to celebrate Mass. In one occasion, while the mass was going on, I wandered out to the atrium of the main entrance.



Photo: The creation of Adam, a fresco by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City

I could still remember that distinct moment. The atrium was dim and solemn. I was walking about aimlessly when I suddenly became aware of the presence of God. Do not ask me how I knew it because words lack the ability to describe it. It is one of those moments when: YOU JUST KNOW. You can argue with me for many hours about it but it will not change my conviction. All I can tell you was that I felt *A CERTAINTY WITHIN MY HEART THAT THERE IS A GOD*. It was a fleeting moment but for me it was like eternity. It is very personal and so convincing that even to this moment the certainty endures. It has been my source of strength when times get worst. It allowed me to talk to God in a personal way and not be afraid or ashamed to honestly express myself to Him.

I believe each of us will experience these 'touches of God' in distinct moments of our lives. It comes when we least expect it but when the moment is there, it demands our attention. **Psalm 46:10** describes it well: *"¹⁰ Be still, and know that I am God..."*

The 'touches of God' consistently present some common elements or series of experiences. I will try to make the encounters more tangible to the mind by expounding a little on this sequence of experiences. (1) It begins with an inner awareness; the touch of God. (2) It is then followed by a feeling of unworthiness before Him. (3) Simultaneous to the awareness of our unworthiness is the assurance that we are loved by Him nonetheless; an awareness of His infinite love. (4) The final part is the person's resolution to begin again and to be a better person in the future.

1. Awareness of the presence of God:

I believe, that the first part, the **inner awareness of God's presence**, is something we cannot induce. We cannot create the moment or prepare the setting in order for it to happen. It reminds me of that scene in the **Song of Songs** when the beloved searched for her Lover in the night:

"¹ On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves- I sought him but I did not find him. ² I will rise then and go about the city; in the streets and crossings I will seek Him whom my heart loves. I sought him but I did not find him. ³ The watchmen came upon me as they made their rounds of the city: Have you seen him whom my heart loves?" - Song of Songs 3:1-3

I believe that the moment of encounter is completely in God's hands. He chooses when to peer through the window of our soul and say: *"Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!" - Song of Songs 2:10*

2. The feeling of unworthiness:

I also do not believe that to receive the 'touches of God' is reserved only for the holy. To think of it that way, is for me, being presumptuous and it endangers us to falling into pride. In my opinion, the gift is for everyone regardless of the state of their soul. I am thinking right now of Zacchaeus who was earning from the taxes of the people. He climbed a tree to see what was happening in the crowd and Jesus looked up at him clutching onto the tree. Jesus told Zacchaeus of his wish to dine with him in his house. I also remember the scene of a Samaritan woman who already had five husbands and was living with someone who is not her husband. She went out to fetch water at Jacob's well at a time when Jesus was sitting nearby. I am also thinking of Saul who was riding a horse together with many soldiers. He was out to get as many Christians as he can and put them

into prison when God decided to touch his heart. This, I believe is one of the reasons why when we receive the 'touches of God,' we always feel a **sense of unworthiness**. But then again, I do not think that anyone, even if he has lived a good life, will ever feel worthy in the presence of the Divine. When you are before the 'Eternal Light' all the black spots of your soul will definitely become evident.

3. Awareness of God's infinite love:

This brings us to the third part of the encounter which is quite simultaneous with the feeling of unworthiness. The third part is the **feeling of the infinite and unconditional love of God**. At this point, you realize that despite of your unworthiness, God loves you without reserve. I would like to quote the scene in the New Testament where a woman was about to be stoned by the crowd and she was brought before Jesus. Jesus sat down and wrote something on the ground and the people slowly left one by one. Jesus then looked at the woman and said:

*"¹⁰ Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, (and) from now on do not sin anymore." - **John 8:10-11***

4. The resolution to live a better life:

We now go to the fourth and last part of the encounter; **the resolution to live a better life**.

The encounter of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery continues with this passage: *"¹² I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." - **John 8:12***

In my opinion: The touch of God scorches our soul. This is probably the reason why we never forget the experience. The encounter burns and marks our soul.

I would like to invite you right now to recall that scene after Jesus was crucified when two of His disciples were walking in haste to Emmaus. They encountered Jesus along the way and did not immediately recognize Him. But later they said:

*"³² Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" - **Luke 24:32***

To be touched by God is to be set ablaze! But it also requires our cooperation. This brings us to the *Parable of the Sower*. When the sower threw out the seeds, *"⁵ ... some seed fell on the path... ⁶ Some seed fell on rocky ground... ⁷ Some seed fell among thorns... ⁸ And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold." - **Luke 8: 5-8***

In addition, a campfire that is ablaze in a cold, dark night will not remain ablaze if we do not constantly take care of it and provide it with the necessary fuel at regular intervals. But even if the fire starts to mellow, there will still be embers among the ashes for a period of time and we can still blow it back into flames. I do not want to contemplate how it will be for us if we let the remaining embers die.

I would like to picture the tiny ember as a small vigil lamp by the tabernacle of the Lord. A tiny light that gently calls on us to draw near and wait upon the Lord.

To continue our story, at that moment of encounter, the people in the chapel were singing songs. One song remained with me. It was the song I BELIEVE that was popularized by Frankie Layne. Since then, I would sing that song repeatedly in my childhood. When I am in social gatherings and people ask me to give a presentation, as they often do when they see a little child before them, they will definitely hear me singing I BELIEVE. For those who were not yet born during my time, the lyrics goes like this:

I BELIEVE

I believe for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows.
I believe that somewhere in the darkest night a candle glows
I believe for everyone that goes astray someone will come to show the way
I believe, I believe
I believe above the storm the smallest prayer will still be heard
I believe that **Someone** in the great somewhere hears every word
Every time I hear a newborn baby cry or touch a leaf or see the sky
Then I know why I believe
Every time I hear a newborn baby cry or touch a leaf or see the sky
Then I know why I believe

II. Material 2: The Temples of the Lord

I personally classify temples into two categories.

The first category consists of the physical temple. These are tangible structures like an oratory, a church, a cathedral, a basilica or any other physical structure intended for worship depending on the belief or ideology of the people who build them. These temples serve as jumping boards to the second category of temples.

The second category is the temple within a person. St. Paul referred to this in his first letter to the Corinthians when he said, *"¹⁹ Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" - 1Cor 6:19*



Basilica della Santa Casa, Loreto, Italy

1. The First Category of Temples:

The earliest temple of the 'first category' is NATURE. In my opinion, the other temples came into existence because people found it very challenging to constantly *'climb the LORD'S mountain... That he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths.'* – **Isaiah 2:3**

For me, NATURE remains the best 'first category temple' of the Lord to this very day and the other temples, no matter how great and comfortable they may be, pales in comparison to God's

handiwork.

Working for more than eight years in the peripheries have convinced me that what the scriptures say is true: *"¹ The heavens declare the glory of God, the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork, ² day discourses of it to day, night to night hands on the knowledge. ³ No utterance at all, no speech, not a sound to be heard, ⁴ but from the entire earth the design stands out, this message reaches the whole world."* - **Psalm 19:1-4**

Whenever we introduce a young friar to the work in the peripheries, I would often emphasize to them that our work in the field is 80 to 90 % prayer and contemplation. Only 10 to 20 % is physical work. When we go out to the field and travel for many hours in the midst of creation, we cannot help but silently wonder and think of the One who made them. When we go to the field in order to provide assistance to people stranded in areas devastated by a super typhoon, an earthquake or a landslide and we feel inadequate amidst the destruction, we also think of God and we pray for His help.

Nature reveals to us a lot of things about God and teaches us how to truly pray. Hence, we need to preserve this temple for generations to come so that they too can go to God's mountain and be instructed in the mysteries of His ways. We need to preserve nature so that nature can continue to lead them to the Spirit that calls us towards the second temple which we will now reflect upon.

2. The second category of temples:

The second category of temples is the temple in us. The term 'temple within' is a little misleading because experience of prayer will tell us that the temple within is not exactly within. Again, in this aspect, the words fall short in trying to describe a mystery. But, in order to help the mind picture it, we will content ourselves with the term 'temple within'.

St. Francis of Assisi illustrates this 'inner temple' beautifully when he says that every friar is a hermit whether he is in a physical hermitage in the mountains or going about the world living out the Gospel. St. Francis teaches that our BODY is the hermitage and our SOUL is the hermit that lives within. With this outlook, a friar can remain at peace even in the most distressing situation.

I am reminded of a story about St. Francis and Br. Leo. They were out walking in the world when St. Francis called out to Br. Leo. He asked brother Leo what is perfect joy. Br. Leo said that he did not know the answer and maybe Br. Francis can enlighten him. St. Francis then told Br. Leo a story. He asked Br. Leo to imagine that it was at the dead of night and they are returning from Perugia to the convent of the Portiuncula in Assisi. It is stormy and very cold that icicles started to form in the hem of their habits. The icicles cut through the skin of their legs causing blood to come out. Upon knocking at the door of the convent, they were not recognized by the brother who opened the door and he rejected them despite of all their explanations. If they remain at peace despite the rejection, then, according to St. Francis, it means they have already received the grace of perfect joy.

Reflections:

In yesterday's session (Day 1 of the 9-day Laudato Si Retreat), Br. Riccardo Corti relates to us how the homeless are teaching him about prayer. Today in this session, we see how nature also teaches and guides us in prayer.

Our two sessions show to us the beautiful synergistic relationship between the poor, nature and ourselves. Oftentimes, I would go on a mission with my brothers thinking that we will be giving a lot of service to the poor and to creation but each time we return to the convent we often feel that we have received more than what we gave.

I mentioned in the previous session that walking hand in hand with the poor and with creation is not enough. We need another component to complete the picture. That important element is the loving Father who binds us all together into one family. This loving Father always reaches out to us. He touches us constantly in our life. Waiting patiently for our response.

May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil and bring us to eternal life. Amen.

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