

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS

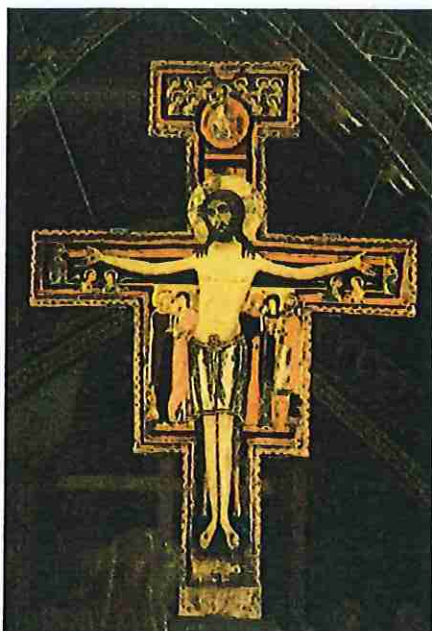


“Go and Repair My House: The Year of Saint Francis of Assisi”

The year was 1206. A young Francis knelt before the Crucifix in the Church of San Damiano outside of Assisi, Italy, which was falling into ruins. Francis heard the voice of Christ Jesus speak to him from the cross: “Francis, go and repair my house, which is falling into ruin.” Understandably, Francis took this exhortation to mean that he should physically rebuild the crumbling church, but later came to understand that instead it was a call to mission to revitalize the Catholic Church!

In his first Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te*, published on October 4, 2025, the Memorial of Saint Francis of Assisi, our Holy Father Pope Leo XIV wrote: “Eight centuries ago, Saint Francis prompted an evangelical renewal in the Christians and society of his time. Wealthy and self-confident, the young Francis was taken aback and converted by his direct contact with the poor and outcast of society. The story of his life continues to appeal to the minds and hearts of believers, and many non-believers as well. It ‘changed history.’ And in January of this year, Pope Leo established that a special Year of Saint Francis be proclaimed, “in which every faithful Christian, following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, shall become a model of holiness of life and a constant witness of peace.” To that end, I write to encourage you intentionally to engage this special year dedicated to Francis, and to consider more deeply his life and legacy.

After several encounters with the Lord who came alive and spoke from that Cross of San Damiano, Saint Francis wrote this “Prayer before the Crucifix,” a prayer which has become a favorite of mine:



*Most High glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart
Give me right faith, sure hope and
perfect charity.
Fill me with understanding and
knowledge
that I may fulfill your command.*

For some folks, the name of Saint Francis conjures up images of garden statues of the saint preaching to the birds, or a sweet cartoonish character surrounded with Disneyesque animals! For some he is reduced to a pacifist, an ecologist or environmentalist. Often folks miss the radical Gospel poverty he embraced and his lifelong commitment to the poor. Some might recall that it was Saint Francis who gave us the first (living) Christmas creche, or that it was he who gave us the words we so often pray with the Stations of the Cross: “We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your Holy Cross, you have redeemed the world.” We all need to see how central the Cross was to his spirituality and to recall that he received toward the end of his life the stigmata, the mystical wounds of Christ evident on his body. Many are simply unaware that the profound humility of Saint Francis was manifested in his judging himself as the worst of sinners. This Lent, there is much to ponder about this extraordinary Saint, and however deep your knowledge and familiarity with him, I invite you to spend time in prayer, reading and doing some “digging” to discover the full range of the multifaceted virtues and example of such a beloved saint, whose love was born from the Cross.

Even as we commemorate the 800th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis, we marvel at the extraordinary number of faithful making pilgrimage to Assisi to pray before his relics, exposed for veneration for the first time since his death. And even now, as we remember the Francis who traveled to Egypt to meet with the Muslim Sultan during the fifth Crusade to encourage peace, we ourselves beg the Lord for peace in this, our time of war.



Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, Caravaggio c. 1595

Among the most powerful artistic testimonies to the transforming love of God at work in the life of Saint Francis is the celebrated work “Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy,” painted around 1595 by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. This oil on canvas masterpiece by the Italian Baroque master depicts the moment Francis receives the stigmata — the miraculous impression of the five wounds of Christ upon his hands, feet, and side. Caravaggio renders the scene not with triumphant spectacle, but with intimate tenderness: Francis reclines in a near-swoon, cradled gently by an angel, bathed in the luminous light that breaks through surrounding darkness. The stigmata represent the summit of Francis’s union with the crucified and risen Lord. He who had knelt before the San Damiano Cross in prayer had so given himself to God that his very body bore the marks of Christ’s Passion. Caravaggio’s masterwork invites every believer to contemplate the depth of love to which each of us is called — a love that transforms, that costs, and that ultimately becomes a witness of glory. Our love is born from the Love of the Crucified and Risen Jesus.

In the spirit of this holy year, and in communion with the universal Church, I am pleased to announce that during this time of grace, extending through January 10, 2027, the faithful are granted the opportunity of a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions. As Francis embraced both the Crucified Christ and all of creation with open arms, so too are we called to embrace our brothers and sisters, our world, and our God with renewed zeal, mercy, and love.

I am deeply grateful to the Sylvania Franciscan Sisters, the Tiffin Franciscan Sisters, and the Conventual Franciscan Friars of the Province of Our Lady of Consolation for graciously opening their campuses to the faithful of our Diocese. Through their generous hospitality, Catholics throughout the Diocese of Toledo are able to participate in this Jubilee Year by making a pilgrimage to the following Franciscan Pilgrimage Sites:

Portiuncula

On the Motherhouse grounds of the Sylvania Franciscan Sisters
620 Convent Blvd, Sylvania, OH 43560
Open Every Day from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM

Motherhouse Eucharistic Chapel

On the grounds of the Tiffin Franciscan Sisters
200 St. Francis Avenue, Tiffin, OH 44883
Chapel: Open Wednesday & Sunday, 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM | Mass at 11:00 AM,

Grounds: Open Every Day, 9:00 AM to Dusk

The Basilica & National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation

The Conventual Franciscan Friars of the Province of Our Lady of Consolation
315 Clay St, Carey, OH 43316
Open 24/7

For more information on the pilgrimage, on obtaining the “Passport,” and more on how to participate, go to toledodiocese.org/francis.

Please join me in the hope and prayer that this Jubilee Year may draw us ever more deeply into the mystery of God’s love, revealed in the face of His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the person of Saint Francis who so radically imitated the Lord! May Saint Francis of Assisi, who so completely surrendered himself to that love, intercede for us and lead us along the path of peace, joy, and holiness. As Francis himself prayed before the San Damiano Cross, so let us pray with renewed hearts — asking God to enlighten the darkness of our own lives, to strengthen our faith, hope and charity, and to set us aflame with love for Him and for one another. As Francis heard the Lord’s exhortation from the Cross, so may we too become models of holiness of life and constant witnesses of peace, architects of an evangelical renewal, building up the Church through lives enriched by a deeper encounter this year with Saint Francis. Saint Francis, intercede for us!

+ Daniel E. Thomas

Most Rev. Daniel E. Thomas
Bishop of Toledo
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