“Beloved: I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God you have ... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love”

From the Letter of St. Paul to Timothy

793 years ago, a little man who lived in a cave, ate sparingly, wore the roughest of clothes, imposed great penances upon his body, was almost completely blind, died. He was 44 years old. Some called him crazy. Some called him saint. The world came to know him as the Little Man of Assisi, St. Francis. Every year, the Church marks his feast day on October 4th with calls to live a simpler life, calls to live a life more in tune with the natural creation, calls to celebrate and have a feast in honor of the saint’s holy life, calls to come to the churches and have the animals, the pets blessed. But really, what can the life of a small town obscure little Italian man from a bygone age possibly have to say to this totally different modern world?

Maybe one of the most famous stories from St. Francis’ life might give us the answer.

Francis was the son of a merchant and, in his time, that meant that he grew up in an upper middle class family. As a child and then as a young man, Francis always cared about how he looked, the clothes he wore, the foods he ate, the rooms he lived in. He wanted to be clean,
comfortable, well-off, attractive. Every time he would be out and about, he recoiled in disgust when he would encounter someone who was disfigured by sickness. He walked right on by the beggars who always seemed to have their hands out for some coin or consideration. But one day, as he was riding his horse in the countryside, he came upon a leper whose flesh was eaten away by the disease, a leper who was dressed in rags, a leper who smelled of rot and dirt and sweat. And for the first time in his life, Francis felt something other than loathing or disgust. He dismounted his horse and shared his cloak with the leper and then, moved by some crazy ... or, divine ... impulse, kissed the poor man’s ravaged, ugly face. From that chance meeting, Francis’ life would change to be centered around a different set of values than those of his upbringing.

Not long after his encounter with the leper, Francis was again out riding in the rural countryside. He came upon an old crumbling little wayside chapel, the Chapel of San Damiano. While he knelt before the crucifix in the ruins of the chapel praying, Francis heard a voice speak to him: “Francis, repair my church, which has fallen into disrepair, as you can see.” Francis took the message literally and set about to rebuild the little chapel of San Damiano. It was only after he had restored that little church in the woods that Francis realized the voice of Jesus was asking him to accomplish a much wider mission. Jesus from the cross was asking him to call the Church all over the world back to the simplicity of the gospel, to the spirit of poverty which Jesus had embraced, back to see Christ, not in gold and pomp and vestments, but in the faces of the poor.

Many times each week I have to drive on the highway that runs through the city of Worcester. Worcester is a city of churches: look in
almost any direction and you’ll see the spire of one church or another rising into the sky. Many of those churches are Catholic, planted years ago by immigrants who came to work in the mills and factories of central Massachusetts. They were French Canadian, Irish, Polish, Italians, Swedes, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Africans, Central Americans.

Today, the neighborhoods that once supported those churches have changed now filled with new people speaking different languages, embracing different cultures and customs, carrying with them, in many cases, different religions or no religions.

One of the churches I pass on my drive, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel was founded by Italians who came to live and work in America and live downtown in the Shrewsbury Street area of the city. Many of the Italians have moved to other areas and other towns. The church was no longer supported and fell into disrepair. Now it is closed and over the past several weeks has been demolished. It is just a pile of rubble now. Each time I drive by there now, I think of St. Francis and the call he received from Jesus to “rebuild my Church”.

It is as if I can almost hear from the pile of rubble that was Mt. Carmel Jesus say to me, “Rebuild my Church.” I don’t think the Lord is asking me or you to rebuild some particular building. I think He is asking us to be like the early disciples and go out from the upper room filled with God’s Holy Spirit and take the message, the Word, the Person of Jesus Christ to a city, a town, a family, a Church who have largely forgotten who He is. I think He is asking us as His disciples to put our faith into action: reaching out to the poor; welcoming the stranger; clothing the naked; feeding the hungry; caring for creation; comforting the afflicted and all the while seeing that it is Jesus I
reach out to. It is Jesus I welcome; Jesus I am feeding; Jesus' world I am caring for; Jesus I am comforting.

“Rebuild my Church,” He tells us. The materials we must use are not brick and mortar but ourselves, living stones built into a great cathedral of faith, bound together in love and mercy, a family united in the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, a passionate force for good enlivened by the fire of our adoration for Jesus Christ.

Our faith, our Church will never be accepted by a disbelieving, selfish modern world until and unless we, the disciples of Jesus Christ are seen to know Him, to love Him with all that we have and all that we are, to radically follow Him in our love and kindness to all. Until we the Church are seen as a little crazy like St. Francis, a little simple and poor like St. Francis, a little suffering like St. Francis, a little different like St. Francis, a little radical like St. Francis, the Church will not be rebuilt and only the very few will find the living Lord Jesus in the rubble of our lukewarm, ho-hum, don’t ask me to do anything faith.

To me and to you, Jesus says: “REBUILD MY CHURCH!”