Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

A pastoral letter from Bishop Raimo Goyarrola of Helsinki on the 800th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi.

4 October 2026

Dear brothers and sisters,

This year, together with the whole Church, we celebrate the 800th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi. He is one of the best-known and most beloved saints in the history of Christianity. From Assisi in central Italy, his life and message have crossed centuries, cultures and borders, and continue to touch the hearts of men and women of every nation today.

During this jubilee year, I wish to thank God for the gift of Saint Francis and for all the good that his life, his witness and the various Franciscan communities continue to do in the Church and in the world. We in Finland, too, have particular reason to give thanks for this Franciscan charism. The Franciscans have been present in Finland since the earliest days of the Christian faith here in the Nordic countries. They have played a significant part in proclaiming the Gospel in our country and have made the face of Christ visible among our people.

Saint Francis still speaks to us today. And perhaps one of the words our society most needs to hear at this moment is poverty.

At first hearing, this may seem a strange word. We live in a society that strives to own more, enjoy more, accumulate more and secure our future ever more firmly. Yet the Gospel shows us another way: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3).

Christian poverty does not necessarily mean having nothing. Nor does it mean despising material goods or considering the ownership of possessions to be wrong in itself. Above all, this evangelical poverty means not allowing our possessions to possess us. It means living with a free and grateful heart, open to God and to our neighbours.

I would like to reflect on three dimensions of the virtue of poverty that Saint Francis lived out in an exceptional way.

1. Jesus was born poor, lived poor and died poor

To understand Christian poverty, we must first and foremost look to Jesus Christ. The Son of God could have chosen any place in which to come into the world. Yet he was born into poverty in Bethlehem. We remember from the Christmas Gospel that there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the inn, so the child was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger in a stable. During his public ministry, Jesus did not accumulate wealth or seek merely human security. He travelled from place to place, proclaiming the kingdom of God and trusting entirely in the guidance of his heavenly Father.

At the end of his life, Jesus died poor, crucified on a cross. The path of Jesus passes through poverty because it is the path of self-giving. Christ clings to nothing. He gives himself entirely to the Father and entirely to us. Saint Paul expresses this reality powerfully: “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Saint Francis understood this mystery profoundly. When he encountered Christ, he realised that following him meant becoming like him in his poverty as well. Francis therefore wanted to live the Gospel radically, trusting in God and renouncing everything that might prevent him from following Jesus freely. We, too, are called to walk this path. We cannot follow Christ if our hearts are filled with other things.

Poverty is therefore an important condition of Christian life, because it helps us to place our trust in God rather than in our possessions, our money, our reputation, our work, our plans or even our own abilities. Heaven cannot be bought with money. The kingdom of God is received as a gift. And to receive a gift, our hands must be open.

2. Poverty means detachment and inner freedom

Christian poverty begins in the heart. A person may have many possessions and still be profoundly poor in spirit. Another may own very little yet be completely attached to what they have. The fundamental question is not how much we possess, but how tightly our possessions hold us in their grasp.

We can ask ourselves honestly: What takes up too much room in my heart? What would I find very difficult to give up? What do I really need in order to live? How much do I have that I do not use, do not need and yet find difficult to give away?

Detachment makes us free. Sometimes we think that owning more makes us freer. Yet the opposite may be true. The more possessions we accumulate, the more things we have to look after, protect, maintain and defend. In the end, we may become servants of our own possessions.

Evangelical poverty calls us to return to a simpler life. The aim is not to live in misery, but to live without unnecessary possessions and unnecessary bonds.

Saint Francis found true riches in Christ. When a person finds Christ, many other things fall into their proper place. Poverty is therefore also a school of freedom. It enables us to say: “I have this, but I do not need to cling to it.” — “I can enjoy this, but my happiness does not depend on it.” — “I can lose this without losing what is essential.”

A truly free person can give, share, let go and begin again. In this sense, evangelical poverty is a particularly important calling for all of us, including those of us who live in the relatively affluent society of Finland. Perhaps precisely because we have so many opportunities, we need to learn once again to distinguish between what we need and what we merely want. Let us ask ourselves, in our families, in our communities and individually: Could we live with a little less so that we might love a little more?

3. Poverty makes us generous towards those in need

Christian poverty, however, does not end with ourselves. Detachment from possessions in our hearts inevitably leads to generosity. Those who are not attached to their possessions can put them at the service of others. A Christian cannot pass by a suffering person with indifference.

Jesus identifies in a special way with the poor, the little ones, the sick, strangers and all those who need our help. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Evangelical poverty therefore has a profoundly practical dimension. It is not enough to say that we love the poor. We must share our possessions and our lives with them.

Our diocese has many opportunities to live out this dimension of poverty. We do so, for example, through the collections taken up in our parishes. We do so through the membership contribution, which makes it possible to sustain the life of our Church and fulfil its mission. We also do so through Caritas, accompanying and helping refugees, immigrants and families facing difficulties.

We do so, too, whenever a parish community notices concrete needs around it and seeks ways to respond to them. Christian love begins close to home, with the brother or sister before us, but it knows no borders. Our solidarity can also reach people in need in other countries, especially where poverty, war, persecution or natural disasters make life even more difficult for so many of our brothers and sisters.

Every euro shared in love can become a sign of hope. Every hour freely given can be a work of mercy. Every person welcomed and listened to can experience something of God's love. Saint Francis understood this in an exceptional way. His encounters with the poor were not merely a matter of social assistance. In the poor, he discovered the face of Christ. We, too, are called to make this discovery.

4. An adventure of freedom and love

Dear brothers and sisters, celebrating Saint Francis does not mean merely remembering a great saint of the past. It means hearing anew a call that remains relevant today. Francis reminds us that the Gospel can truly be lived. We can trust in God. We can live simply. We can give up many things. We can be generous. We can discover that true happiness does not mean possessing more, but loving more. And this is not a sad or heavy burden. Quite the contrary. Evangelical poverty is an adventure in freedom.

God does not call us to a grey and sorrowful life. He calls us to a life full of passion, freedom and love. He calls us to let go of what binds us so that we can receive far more than we could ever imagine for ourselves. Saint Francis experienced this when he left behind his merely human securities to follow Christ. His life shows us how far a person can go when they place their trust entirely in God.

Today, too, Jesus calls us to this adventure. Each of us can ask ourselves before God: What does the Lord want me to give up so that I may become freer? With whom does he want me to share what I have received? Let us ask Saint Francis to help us respond generously. Let us ask him to teach us to look upon the poor Christ in Bethlehem, Christ who lived without clinging to anything, and Christ who gave himself completely on the cross.

May Saint Francis teach us to be poor in heart: to live with hearts that are free, grateful and generous. And as we follow his example, may the Diocese of Helsinki become ever more a poor Church for the poor and with the poor: a Church that does not cling to itself but goes out to meet everyone; a Church that knows how to share what it has; a Church that proclaims Jesus Christ in word and deed; a Church that makes the joy and beauty of the Gospel visible in Finland.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Lord's humble handmaid, and Saint Francis of Assisi, a poor and joyful man, accompany us on this path. With my blessing and prayers,

+ Raimo Goyarrola
Bishop of Helsinki