

Francis and the Church

Francis of Assisi was Catholic through and through. He was born into a Catholic family, baptized shortly after birth and given the Christian name of John. As an adolescent, he received some education in a church school from priests, and virtually everyone who surrounded him was Catholic, albeit with different levels of spiritual maturity and understanding. He experienced his conversion as a young adult – not that he changed religions – rather he began to live out his Catholic faith in a much more profound and sincere way. However, Francis’s relationship to the Church was unique and he himself, despite his belief in the Church, did not want to become a priest or monk, which were essentially the Religious options for a man of his time. Instead, he began a unique spiritual movement within the official canonical structure of the Catholic Church.

Francis says that he did not become a priest because he felt unworthy. However, if one reads between the lines, one might conclude that he did not feel called to enter into one of the pre-existing Orders available within the Church. Had he become a canon or priest, he would have entered into a hierarchical, clerical tradition obedient to the watchful bishop with time-tested ways and expectations of how things were done. Or if he became a monk, the other mainstream Religious option, he would have entered into an even more structured way of life. Francis, familiar with the comfortable living among many monks, clerics and bishops, avoided the traditional Religious options and chose his own way because he wanted to be free to live the Gospel as he understood it. The old ways of doing things did not fit his ideals of the *Vita Evangelica*, or Gospel Life of total poverty. Francis, ever the penitent, sought to live poverty just as Jesus commanded in Matthew: “Take nothing with you for the journey...” Additionally, Francis desired his

movement to be structured according to service in fraternal brotherhood, not according to the vertical understanding of authoritative leadership and servile obedience as was customary in the monasteries and dioceses of his day.

Because Francis insisted on going against the religious mainstream, he has been called the first Protestant, the first hippie, the first environmentalist. The anti-clerics love to bemoan their view of the Franciscan story that his pristine ideal was ultimately squashed by the ever-oppressive, scheming, Machiavellian, Catholic Church. This started with the French Protestant, Paul Sabatier, who was the first to begin studying the life of Francis from a critical perspective in the late 19th century. The truth is that, despite the originality of his religious life, he was not anti-ecclesial, which we will see. Francis remained Catholic on his own accord and his beliefs were orthodox his entire life. He willfully made an effort to live his life and Rule with hierarchical approval; he sought the advice and direction of bishops; he allowed Church teachings and directives to guide him; he was passionately devoted to Mary and worshiped and adored Jesus in the Eucharist. And despite the sins and laxity on the part of the clergy, there exists not one record of Francis condemning them – this in contrast to his many contemporaries – both Catholic and heretic alike – who spewed condemnations and denunciations of the clergy.

To say that Francis was Catholic might seem strange since he lived during the High Middle Ages a good three centuries before Martin Luther was born. After all, wasn't everyone in Western Europe Catholic before the Reformation? The truth is that medieval religious culture was a lot less homogenous than most think. The laxity among the clergy and monks that led to the 11th century Gregorian Reforms caused scandal and

dissatisfaction among the laity. Criticism of the Church, its priests, monks, and bishops was commonplace.

Many disgruntled laity who had embraced the *Vita Evangelica* and the *Vita Apostolica* were wandering around preaching against the privileged and wealthy lives of the clergy, whose way of living was dramatically different from their lives of Gospel poverty. These lay preachers often held themselves up as the only true Christians and would 'prove' it by demonstrating from Scriptural passages that their own lives were conformed to the Scriptures while the Catholic clergy were not. And it didn't take much to convince the uneducated peasants who were certainly aware of the contrast between their own deprived lives and the pomp and excess among the clergy.

The most seditious among the heterodox movements were the Cathars, a sect originating in the East, whose dualistic beliefs echoed those of 5th century Manichaeism, out of which St. Augustine converted to Christianity. The Cathars, also known as Albigensians, believed in two gods – the good god of the spirit, and the bad god of matter. Therefore, they rejected the world as evil (and that which causes procreation leading to more evil matter) choosing instead poverty. They considered themselves Christian, however, their beliefs were very far from the orthodox teachings of the conventional Church.

Two other groups fell into heresy not so much from their errant creed, but because of schism: the Humiliati and Waldensians. These two groups embraced the penitential lay life of evangelical poverty, as well as itinerant preaching. The interesting thing is that these two groups began as orthodox, and even directed much of their preaching against the Cathar heretics in favor of mainstream Catholicism. The Humiliati had a large

following and were initially given clerical approval to live their way of life. Similar to the Franciscan family, they were divided into three Orders: canonical, monastic, and lay. However, they were not given complete permission to preach – they could only preach in a diocese whose bishop allowed them. This would be their downfall, as some ignored this directive and preached anyway. This led to schism, and subsequent excommunications. However, it was on a case-by-case basis, based on individual circumstances of orthodoxy or heterodoxy. Later many were re-communicated.

Peter Waldo, like the Humiliati (and eventually Francis), went to Rome seeking papal approval for his way of life, his beliefs were examined and he was judged orthodox. However, like the Humiliati, being a lay movement, he and his followers were expressly forbidden to preach when the local bishop would not allow it. Here Waldo would choose his fate and split from the orthodox Church quoting the book of Acts, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), which would become the rallying cry of countless Protestants centuries later beginning with Luther.

The bishops, at a loss for how to handle these dissident lay movements, reacted predictably in order to preserve the Church from their false teachings which were leading many astray. After excommunications, they resorted to counter-preaching, councils, theological tracts, heretical crusades, and adjudication. And this was the situation into which Francis stepped when he began to attract followers in the early 13th century.

We don't know exactly why Francis went to Rome in 1209 with his early companions seeking clerical acceptance. Although there is no evidence of this, someone, like Bishop Guido of Assisi, or another friend of Francis familiar with the way things worked in the Holy See, probably persuaded him to do so to get approval for his way of

life. Francis was probably advised that he risked being lumped in with the other heretics, which was a legitimate possibility. The truth is that he looked a lot like the heretics, and he needed to distinguish himself as one of the good guys: both Francis and the heretics embraced Evangelical poverty; they were lay, not clerically based; they claimed inspiration directly from the Bible. Since they were laity, there was no clerical control over them and most bishops couldn't tell the lay preachers apart and didn't know what to do with them. But, the most serious problem was that their preaching was turning many against the official Church, so excommunication was the solution. Hence, a Papal Bull would be just what Francis needed to distinguish him from the heretics.

So after Francis wrote a brief Rule, he met Pope Innocent III in 1209, and was granted verbal approval for his way of life. On the part of the hierarchy, one might surmise that they finally found someone on their side who could serve as an effective antidote to the heterodox movements: orthodox preachers who lived faithful Gospel poverty as did the heretics. And soon a Spaniard would join in the struggle. The Mendicant Orders - the Dominicans and Franciscans – would launch the counter-attack and show the populace that they need not turn against the institutional Church, and that it was possible to live authentic Gospel poverty in an orthodox manner while remaining Catholic.

It is fascinating how strikingly similar the stories of Francis and the heretics are. For example, both Francis and Waldo were merchants who experienced an adult conversion and chose the penitential lay life of Gospel poverty and mendicant preaching; they both went to Rome to ask for approval for their lives and were given the same answer. Yet their fates were radically different. Francis chose to accept providence within

the bounds of the Church, while Waldo chose independence. The interesting thing is that today after eight centuries, St. Francis is known and admired all over the world as a gentle man of peace, unity and prayer. Peter Waldo, who was probably just as loving, is virtually unheard of. The Waldensian denomination today totals only about 40,000 members worldwide (<http://www.chiesavalde.org>)– which is a remarkable feat that they even still exist given that they are virtually the only Christian denomination whose schism pre-dated the 16th century Protestant Reformation. However, outside the mainstream Church, Waldo’s movement did not have the support to flourish, unlike Francis’s.

So having demonstrated that Francis definitively submits to the Pope and the Church, it is clear also that he wanted to ensure that his whole brotherhood would follow his example. In the Prologue of the Rule of 1221, Francis writes that he and whoever leads his Order will promise obedience to the Popes. In medieval literature, we should assume that everything written serves a definite purpose and is not frivolous. Writing (and subsequent copying by scribes) before the invention of the 16th century printing press was a tedious and expensive process, not unlike filmmaking today. So, we should assume that everything written was definitely meant to be there. Francis was aware of the temptations of the anti-ecclesial movements out there, and he wanted to ensure that successive leadership would not fall away from the Church, a legitimate fear.

Francis was faithful not only to the universal Church, but he was devoted also to particular churches. It started when he heard his life vocation at San Damiano: “Go and rebuild my C(c)hurch that has fallen into ruin.” Initially Francis understands that to mean Jesus’ command to restore the architectural edifice of a particular church (only later will

he realize its universal implications), and he set out to restore the churches of San Damiano, the Porziuncula, and San Pietro. Francis's belief in churches can be summarized in verses 4-13 from his Testament written shortly before his death. He writes in verse 4 that the Lord gave him faith in churches, and then quotes a traditional prayer inspired by the Holy Thursday liturgy, "We adore You, Lord Jesus Christ, in all Your churches throughout the world, and we bless You, for through Your holy cross You have redeemed the world." Francis is also known to have brought brooms with him when he preached in order to clean up dirty churches, as an example to the populace.

In verse 6 of the Testament, Francis declares his belief in priests: "Afterward the Lord gave me and still gives me such faith in priests who live according to the manner of the holy Roman Church because of their order, that if they were to persecute me, I would still have recourse to them." He also says, "I would not preach contrary to their will in the parishes in which they live. And I desire to fear, love, and honor them and all others as my masters. And I do not wish to consider sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my masters." These are remarkable statements given the widespread criticism of priests in Francis's day because of their laxity and corruption.

There is a story, which demonstrates Francis's faith in priests, as told by a 13th century Dominican who recounts Francis being interrogated by a Cathar who posits the question: "If a priest maintains a concubine, and thereby stains his hands, must we believe in his teaching and respect the sacraments he administers." Francis, instead of answering, goes straight to the priest to whom the heretic was referring and kisses his hands. Francis states that that priest's hands have the power to consecrate the body and blood of Jesus, and in no way does his personal sanctity affect this power.

In effect, Francis was reiterating a Church teaching that had been speculated by St. Augustine centuries before against the Donatists. The question was whether a priest's objective sacramental ministry was dependent on his subjective holiness. Was the Eucharist consecrated *ex opere operato*, i.e. from the act by the act itself, or *ex opere operantis*, i.e. from the act of the one effecting it? The opinion of the Church was that the personal sanctity of the priest was irrelevant regarding his priestly ministries, while many heretics maintained the contrary. The lay Cathari even consecrated Eucharist during their Masses, claiming that their particular holiness effected the consecration, not their ordinations (or lack thereof). This theological question continued for centuries and disturbed Martin Luther who said he never felt worthy enough to consecrate the host. The Church would end up codifying it as canon in the Council of Trent.

In Francis's Testament, we can understand why he was so steadfastly devoted to churches and priests. (Can quote Admonition I). In his Testament he states in verse 10: "And I act this way since I see nothing corporally of the Most High Son of God in this world except His Most holy Body and Blood which [priests] receive and which [priests] alone administer to others." Francis believes in churches and priests because that is where and through whom he receives the Eucharist. Francis loves and adores Jesus' Real Presence in the Most Holy Sacrament of Jesus and without churches or priests he would not be able to receive Jesus. This should not surprise us as he is a faithful Catholic.

To say that he sees Jesus only in the Eucharist is quite a statement, and is striking to modern Catholics who live after the second Vatican Council which held up the presence of God in the Holy Scriptures and assembly during Mass, in addition to the Eucharist. However, just as faithful Catholics today are formed by the theology of

Vatican II, Francis was thoroughly formed by the theology of his day and his attitude reflected current Church teaching.

All of the issues that we have previously discussed such as Francis's respect for and devotion to priests, churches, and the Eucharist reflect issues that were addressed in the fourth Lateran Council. Pope Innocent III launched the Council in 1215 in an attempt to address issues such as heresies, disrespect for the Church and its leaders, and the reform of Eucharistic practice in the Eucharistic Crusade. Francis was present at this Council, and, being the faithful Catholic he was, these issues touched his life and affected his theological understanding. Francis was a man of the Church whose teachings had a tremendous impact on his life and belief.

In conclusion, Francis's understanding of his vocation was unique, and he was aware of God's individual love for him. Therefore he purposefully avoided entering an established religious Order of his day to have the freedom to live out penitential poverty as a lay person outside of traditional clerical structure. However, this does not make him a rebel, a dissident, or an anti-cleric. The Church for Francis was not simply a man-made institution controlled by Machiavellian Monsignors, or a 'celibate male hierarchy'. He was keenly aware of his dependence on the institutional Church – the main reason is that where he experienced the presence of Christ – through priests in the Eucharist, in the churches, and in the people. For Francis, ever faithful son of the Church, the Church is the bride of Christ replete with community, people, salvation, and Trinitarian and Marian mystery. For him to be outside of it would be to lose the most precious thing in his life, in effect the only thing he desired to possess: Jesus.

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