

## Franciscan Prayer

Saint Francis of Assisi spent a lot of time praying, because he received so much spiritual consolation in prayer. Jesus had become everything for Francis, and he desired to communicate with his beloved through prayer. Bonaventure in his Major Legend said of Francis: “Saint Francis realized that he was an exile from the Lord’s presence as long as he was at home in the body, and his love of Christ had left him with no desire for the things of this earth. Therefore, he tried to keep his spirit always in the presence of God, by praying to him without intermission, so that he might not be without some comfort from his Beloved.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Francis did not leave us with any particular treatises or writings specific to prayer, his way of life, other writings, and the Franciscan Sources can be examined to discover a particular model, or school of spirituality. I would like to suggest three aspects central to authentic Franciscan spirituality and prayer: *poverty, being, and imitation*. These three elements, taken together, can offer a deeper insight into Franciscan prayer.

Franciscan prayer must begin with *poverty*. By this, I mean that we should empty ourselves of everything before entering into prayer. A Franciscan Sister once penned, “Without poverty, there is no genuine Franciscanism. Other virtues are Franciscan only in combination with poverty.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, once one is truly poor, then all the other spiritual graces can flow. For Francis, poverty was the starting point of his entire religious outlook and it extended into his prayer life. Poverty must be so complete that before even beginning to pray, we should even acknowledge that we do not know how to pray. With the proper detachment and humble relationship to God, he will fill us up and lead us to himself.

St. Francis intended true poverty to be a detachment from everything, be it material or spiritual, that interfered with God’s ability to reach us. It is in the context of poverty that the spirit of Christ works. Only by being free from those attachments that enslave us, can we be open to receiving God’s love and graces. Franciscan poverty in prayer is, thus, creating the proper interior space within to allow God to penetrate our souls. It consists of emptying ourselves of those temporal things that will not accompany us to Heaven: worries, anxiety, financial problems – all should be cast aside during prayer. These things will not last eternally; instead, during prayer, we should focus on Love (*Caritas*), as that is eternal and will be with us forever.

The poverty of Francis’s prayer life can be seen very clearly in the places where he prayed. He began living community life after brothers began to join his movement in Rivotorto, a few miles south of Assisi. Today there are two re-constructed huts (*tugurio* in Italian) housed underneath a basilica designed to demonstrate the poverty of how they lived. The friars slept in one, ate in the other, and prayed in the space in the middle. Their early life is aptly described as ‘camping out’. Bonaventure described how they prayed in this early hovel:

“They spent their time there [in Rivotorto] praying incessantly, devoting themselves to mental rather than vocal prayer because they did not yet have liturgical books from which to chant the canonical hours. In place of these they had the book of Christ’s cross which they studied continually day and night, taught by the example and words of their father who spoke to them constantly about the cross of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

After the friars left Rivotorto for their permanent home in nearby Saint Mary of the Angels, Francis’s desire for quiet and simple living never left him. He would periodically head for the hills for 40-day prayer fasts. Celano says: “He frequently chose solitary places so that he could direct his mind completely to God”<sup>4</sup>. Anyone who has ever been to central Italy and visited any of these hermitages will be amazed at their simplicity and austerity. Near Assisi are the *Carceri* and San Damiano – both simple and unpretentious, yet naturally elegant. Other hermitages founded by Francis remain in the custody of friars, as well, including LaVerna, the *Celle* of Cortona, Monteluco, Montecasale, Monteripido, Greccio, and others. The natural beauty of these places bursts out upon the visitor in a remarkable way. Francis’s devotion to prayer in

these places was so intense that some have concluded that Francis spent half his converted life in hermitages.<sup>5</sup>

The hermitical way of life has mostly disappeared from the modern Franciscan experience, however in the early days, it was an integral part of the movement. To understand early Franciscan hermitages is to much better understand Franciscan prayer and spirituality. Hermitages were small huts or caves in the hills or mountains, at some distance from the villages and towns (yet near enough to be accessible). They were comprised of small groups of friars in community. The hermitage was different from the monastery in that the hermitical experience was to be temporary. Franciscans rarely lived their entire lives in the hermitage; and for most it was a transitory period interspersed among apostolic activity.

Hermitage played such an important role in Francis's life that he even wrote a brief Rule describing how the hermitical communities should be lived. In the Rule, he refers to three or four friars living together in community who divide the roles of Mary and Martha – the role of Mary was the contemplative who should dedicate himself entirely to prayer while the friar playing Martha would be concerned with meeting the practical needs of the community – as a mother cares for her children. The hermitages would have an important impact on later Franciscan history, as it was there where virtually every Franciscan reform movement began.

In the poverty of the hermitages, Francis spent his time surrounded by nature as God created it. He was not surrounded by fine art, icons, furnishings, or decorations; rather, he was immersed in the bareness of nature. As Francis descended down into the barrenness of the cave to pray in solitude and silence, he was entering into something much bigger than himself. It was there that he was thoroughly filled with the presence of the Lord – with an overwhelming sense of the divine, God's goodness, and his love. "In the clefts of the rock he would build his nest and in the hollow places of the wall his dwelling."<sup>6</sup> There in her stillness, he listened to nature's sounds: he marveled at the chirping of the birds, the rustle of the leaves in the wind, the dancing of the insects, and the twittering of the animals. As Francis lay in the open outdoors at night, he gazed and admired the grandiosity of creation in the stars. During the cold months, how he loved the heat of Brother Fire; then he rejoiced when the power of the Mediterranean sun warmed his body and inner being the first Spring days. In the poverty of the hermitages, how he loved God and truly praised God with all his soul.

After poverty, Franciscan prayer continues with *being*. By this, I intend that prayer involves and encompasses the entire self: the heart, soul, desire, joy, emotions, memory, and feelings. Franciscan prayer is not a half-hearted venture, but, rather, it involves the entire heart. Celano described it thus: "He strove constantly to have his spirit present in heaven. ... His whole soul thirsted after Christ, and he dedicated not only his whole heart, but his whole body as well, to him."<sup>7</sup> Bonaventure says: "Whether he was walking or sitting, at home or abroad, whether he was working or resting, he was so fervently devoted to prayer that he seemed to have dedicated to it not only his heart and soul, but all his efforts and all his time."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the spiritual life for Francis involved his entire self- his whole animus – his complete being.

With a proper spirit of detachment, humility, surrender, i.e. poverty, combined with a total devotion of the entire self, the Christian will be filled with those graces that only God gives. In Francis's case, it often involved his emotions and feelings. The Legend of the Three Companions describe this emotion early in Francis's conversion: "All of a sudden the Lord touched his heart, filling it with such surpassing sweetness that he could neither speak nor move. He could only feel and hear this overwhelming sweetness which detached him so completely from all other physical sensations that, as he said later, had he been cut to pieces on the spot he could not have moved."<sup>9</sup> Bonaventure described it like this: "The world was tasteless to him who was fed with heavenly sweetness."<sup>10</sup> Celano said: "Francis was often suspended in such sweetness of contemplation that, caught up out of himself, he could not reveal what he had experienced because it went beyond all human comprehension."<sup>11</sup>

Francis desired to see, touch, feel, make present, even visually reproduce real events from the life of Christ. For example, Francis often meditated on historical, concrete stories from the life of Christ; i.e. the Nativity, Passion and Resurrection. He sought to enter into these Gospel events, *physically*. Francis often meditated on historical, concrete human dimensions of the life of Christ – his birth, Passion and Resurrection. The desire to recreate these historical events inspired him to re-enact the birth of Jesus in the first nativity scene in the small village of Greccio near Rieti. In St. Francis's day, devotion to the birth of Jesus was not widespread. In fact, since the days of the early Church, Easter was the main feast in the liturgical year. However, St. Francis had a deep devotion to the nativity of Jesus, since he was always thinking of how God had humbled himself by becoming man. Thomas of Celano said, "Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ and recollect His deeds with most attentive perception. Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else." (cf. I Celano, 85) So, in 1223, just three years before he died, he recreated the nativity of Jesus in Greccio. No one had ever done this before. With the assistance of a local nobleman named John, in a cave about one mile from the town of Greccio, animals were brought in including an ox and donkey, along with a young couple with a newborn baby, and some hay. Francis, as a deacon, sang and preached to the people and brothers gathered there about the humility, poverty, and simplicity of God who came in the form of a babe.

Francis also reflected in a similar way on the Passion of Christ. Towards the end of Francis's life, on Mount La Verna in the year 1224, Francis received the stigmata. In that experience, he desired to mystically participate spiritually and physically in the Passion of Christ. He asked the Lord for two gifts: to feel in his body the pain which Jesus felt during his Passion and to know in his heart the love which Jesus felt for all humanity. "My Lord Jesus Christ, two graces I beg from you before I die: the first, that I feel in my body and soul as much as possible the pain that you, sweet Jesus, felt at the hour of your bitter Passion." He wanted to suffer in body and soul that which Christ suffered. He then prayed, "The second is that I feel in my heart, as much as possible, that excess love by which you, Son of God, were willing to bear for us sinners." In the experience of St. Francis, he sought for a total participation in the life of Christ. St. Francis asked to feel all the pain and all the love of Christ. Thus for Francis, prayer was to feel, witness, become involved and personally experience what Christ lived. Later in history, Franciscans would initiate historical traditions into church life, such as processions, the stations of the cross, Passion plays, the *crèche*, and other re-enactments of biblical scenes. Thus *being* consists of being present in the Gospel stories

This spiritual emotion was not limited to Francis's experience; many other Franciscans experienced it. The stories of the Little Flowers of St. Francis are filled with accounts of friars experiencing rapture, sweetness of soul, and ecstasy during prayer. Here are just a few such episodes starting with a description of the spiritual life of Bernard of Quintavalle, the first follower of Francis:

Now the mind of this Brother Bernard was so uplifted to that heavenly treasure which is promised to those who love God that for fifteen continuous years he always went about with both his mind and his face raised toward Heaven. And during those fifteen years, because his mind was raised to the light of Heaven and his feelings were utterly absorbed by divine graces, he never satisfied his hunger at meals.<sup>12</sup>

Section II of the *Fioretti* describes numerous episodes of friars of the Marches province rapt in ecstasy. One such story takes place in a hermitage called Soffiano (which ruins still remain today near the friary of San Liberato). A friar, whose name is not mentioned, was so devoted to God that:

"Once when he was in a rapture and his mind was absorbed in God-for he had the grace of contemplation to a remarkable degree-various kinds of birds came to him and very tamely rested on his head and shoulders and arms and hands, and there they sang

beautifully. When he came out of his contemplation, he was so overflowing with joy that he seemed rather like an angel, for then his face radiated in a marvelous way his communion with God, to such an extent that it aroused wonder and surprise in those who saw him.”<sup>13</sup>

Another such story that took place at Forano in which two friars, who were close companions, experienced an ecstatic vision. The prayer of Brother Conrad was that he might obtain the grace to feel some of the sweetness which St. Simeon felt on the day of her Purification when he held in his arms the Blessed Savior. At that, he was granted a vision in which he held, in his arms, the Christ child. “Brother Conrad took him with very great devotion and pressed his lips to His and clasped Him to his heart. And in these loving embraces and kisses he felt as though his soul were melting away with ineffable consolation.”<sup>14</sup> Then Brother Peter, who was watching the divine vision, “and he too felt a great sweetness in his soul.”<sup>15</sup>

Through these examples we can see how prayer involves the whole self – the emotions, the spirit, the soul, everything. We also see that for the Franciscan, prayer is not a detachment, removal, or separation from the world; on the contrary, it is to feel, witness, become involved in a personal manner. It is entering into the Gospel, participating in it as if it were a living reality, in which we are called to participate passionately. Thus, the Franciscan way of praying is practical; it emphasizes realistic themes of the life of Jesus as opposed to abstract, monastic contemplation.

Lastly, Franciscan prayer should conclude with *imitation*. Or, perhaps the word *transformation* would be more appropriate. After opening himself up to God in complete poverty, and allowing God’s grace to penetrate his innermost soul and being, Francis was transformed. In fact, at the heart of the Franciscan spiritual experience is a transforming encounter with Christ. It was Christ in the vision in Spoleto, Christ in the leper and the beggar, Christ in San Damiano, Christ in the dilapidated churches, Christ in the Gospel, and Christ especially in prayer in remote places that led to Francis’s transformation into a more Christ-like person. Celano said that Francis, after his private prayer, “was changed almost into another man.”<sup>16</sup> He became like Christ, he imitated Christ.

When one thinks of imitating Christ, one thinks of the popular wristband-acronym “WWJD” (what would Jesus do); however, Franciscan imitation of Christ goes deeper. Franciscan imitation of Christ is not so much mimicry; rather, it is a natural response to life (and life’s difficulties) following a spiritual transformation from within the heart. Following Christ is fundamentally not a human enterprise; thus the imitation of Christ does not arise from our own strength. To follow Christ is to allow oneself to be transformed by, through, and in the power of God. John chapter 15 comes to mind: “I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in me while I abide in him produces much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>17</sup> It is Christ who is the vine, from which the branches (Christians) grow, producing fruit. Without the vine, the branches can do nothing. The branches do not stand alone, and in fact, would soon wither and die were they cut off from the vine.

Clare speaks of imitation of Christ in her letters to St. Agnes of Prague. In this, she sought to *enter into* the experience of Christ to the point that he would make her like him. She exhorted the former princess to four words: *intueri*, *considerare*, *contemplari*, and *imitatio* (gaze, consider, contemplate, and imitation.) Clare told Agnes to *gaze* upon the example of Jesus in the poverty on the cross. This gazing involved a complete openness to the other. Just as Jesus has his arms outstretched on the cross, so should Agnes be completely open to embrace Christ within her. The next step was to *consider* (or *reflect* on) just how much God loves through the sacrifice of the cross. It is not we who initiate the relationship, but God – the Creator – who loved us first. God is love, he is generous, God gives of himself – it is his nature. How could God do anything other than sacrifice himself, since he is love? “Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins.” (cf. 1 John 4:10). These

meditations naturally lead to *contemplation* or meditation – an entering into the temple with God, a personal, private encounter with the divine. However, the fourth stage that Clare describes is to *imitate* what Christ did for us.

The Franciscan prayer, ‘Make me a channel of your peace’, exemplifies what the Christian transformation looks like: what we can hope to become. In the prayer, the works of the ‘flesh’ are contrasted with the fruits of the spirit. The author of the prayer asks the Lord to enable him to become an instrument of love, pardon, faith, hope, light, and joy in response to hatred, injury, doubt, despair, darkness, and sadness. The author expresses a desire to offer consolation, understanding, love, giving, pardoning, and death to himself instead of receiving these gifts from others. Through rooting oneself onto Christ, we take on divine aspects, and become re-created in God’s image.

St. Francis had spent his converted life in imitation of Christ, so much so that he was transformed in a very literal way when he received the crucifixion marks of Jesus in 1224. In a mysterious way, on the mountain of LaVerna, he was granted the gift of imitating Christ, after his request to know the pain that Jesus felt on the cross, and the love that Jesus had in his heart for all people. It is a remarkable prayer – without a doubt the prayer request of a saint, and one that few would be inclined to ask. However, Francis was finishing a converted life of roughly 20 years spent in harsh penance and literal imitation of Christ, his cross, and Passion. It was very natural for him to desire to be like Christ in every way – to share love and pain with the God to whom he desired so much to be united in every way.

In summary, we can conclude with the description of prayer by Thomas of Celano: “For his safest haven was prayer; not prayer of a single moment, or idle or presumptuous prayer, but prayer of long duration; full of devotion, serene in humility. If he began late, he would scarcely finish before morning. Walking, sitting, eating, or drinking, he was always intent upon prayer. He would go alone to pray at night in churches abandoned and located in deserted places, where, under the protection of divine grace, he overcame many fears and many disturbances of mind.”<sup>18</sup> In this description, we see Francis completely trusting in God’s Providence. He has emptied himself of his will and self, and has turned to God in total poverty. Thus, the Franciscan should begin with nothing: everything should be surrendered to God’s great Providential care and love. The Christian should enter prayer in a spirit of humility and submission. We see, in this description, how Francis being filled up with God’s graces – only in poverty can God can fill up the believer with all his graces and gifts: joy, sweetness, charity, desire. Finally, we see how Francis is transformed – in this case his spiritual desolation being transformed into consolation. It is our Christian hope that we can become how Celano describes Francis in the end: “All his attention and affection he directed with his whole being to the one thing which he was asking of the Lord, not so much praying as becoming himself a prayer.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bonaventure, *Leggenda Major*, Chapter X, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Sr. Mary Mildred, CSSF, “Christocentrism and Love: Two Basic Forces in Franciscan Formation,” *Cord*, 15 (Jan-Feb 1965): 15.

<sup>3</sup> Bonaventure, *Legenda Major* 3b.

<sup>4</sup> Celano, *I Vita*, Chapter XXVII, 71.

<sup>5</sup> CF works of Dacian Bluma, OFM

<sup>6</sup> Celano, *I Vita*, Chapter XXVII, 71

<sup>7</sup> Celano, *II Vita*, Chapter LXI, 94

<sup>8</sup> Bonaventure, *Legenda Major*, Chapter X, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Leg 3 Soc*, Chapter III, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Celano, *II Vita*, Chapter LXIV, 98

<sup>12</sup> *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Chapter 28.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Chapter 47

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Celano, II Vita, Chapter LXV, 99

<sup>17</sup> John 15:5

<sup>18</sup> Celano, I Vita, Chapter XXVII, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Celano, II Vita, Chapter LXI, 95.