

## Franciscan Prayer

Francis of Assisi developed a unique attitude to prayer that has carried over to our own day. The long-established Religious form of life (and prayer) in his day was monasticism which held up a prayer life which was transcendent, abstract, platonic, and metaphysical. Francis was much more practical and his way of praying emphasized feeling and meditating on real tactile places and events. He was sensible, natural and the conventional monastic tradition seemed too distant and other-worldly for him.

Monasticism, as developed from within the Benedictine tradition, emphasized prayer and work – *ora et labora*. The Benedictines (and monks and nuns of other Orders) lived vowed lives of *stabilitas*, i.e. they would never leave the confines of the cloister. Western monasticism inherited some eastern influences in which the world was considered bad, and in order to reach the highest Christian perfection, one needed to ‘leave the world’ in order to be free to be entirely with God. The prayer lives of the monks consisted primarily of chanting the Office (for the literate *choristi* or choir-monks) or a type of rosary for the *conversi* (lay-brothers). The literate monks often practiced *lectio divina* (divine reading.) This way of reading the Scriptures would lead the reader to inspiration, then to pause and meditate – *meditatio*. This would be followed by prayer – *oratio* – a conversation with God, or the recitation of the inspirational words. Taken together, all this makes up the Benedictine understanding of *contemplatio* – contemplation.

Franciscan prayer retained some of these elements, but was largely a departure from the Benedictine tradition. In general terms, Francis’s understanding of the *Vita Evangelica*, or total Gospel life was that it should be a mix between the contemplative

and the apostolic life. He never intended to live a life of exclusive prayer, unlike the cloistered monks. For Francis, periods of prayer would strengthen the spirit enough for the Christian to return into the world to serve. Francis was, however, tempted at times to dedicate himself entirely to prayer, but in the end he resolved to continue his life of combining apostolic ministry with deep prayer.

Francis is thought to have spent about half his converted life in prayer, and the other half in ministry. He observed several periods of 40-day Lents in addition to the one observed in today's church calendar. He fasted and prayed for the 40 days preceding Easter (like our Lent today), 40 days preceding Christmas (Advent), from Epiphany to Ash Wednesday, from the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul (June 29) to the Assumption of Mary (August 15), and from the Assumption of Mary to September 29 (the archangels).

Francis spent these Lenten prayerful experiences mostly in hermitages. The heremetical way of life has mostly disappeared from the modern Franciscan experience, however in the early days, it was an integral part of the movement. Hermitages were small huts or caves in the hills or mountains, isolated from the villages and towns, and made up of small groups of friars in community. The hermitage was different from the monastery in that the 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 the early Franciscan movement that Francis himself even wrote a brief Rule describing how the heremetical 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 Rule says that friars should periodically switch roles. The hermitages would have an important impact on later Franciscan history, as it was there where virtually every Franciscan reform movement began.

Francis spent so much time in prayer because that is where he received much spiritual transformation. Thomas of Celano in Chapter XI of his First Life describes what happened to Francis in hermitages. He describes Francis retreating to a ‘place of prayer’ for much time in order to pray about an issue that was bothering him. He says that slowly a ‘certain unspeakable joy and very great sweetness began to flood his innermost heart... as his feelings were checked and the darkness that had gathered in his heart because of his fear of sin dispelled, there was poured into him a certainty that all his sins had been forgiven and a confidence of his restoration to grace was given him.’ Celano paints a beautiful picture of how, through prayer, Francis’s desolation is transformed into spiritual consolation.

Francis was very much a down-to-earth person; his way of praying emphasized realistic themes of the life of Jesus as opposed to abstract, monastic contemplation. 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 Francis to re-enact the birth of Jesus in the first nativity scene in Greccio. Through this experience, one can enter into the place, witness the people – Mary, Joseph, shepherds, Magi, the animals, and the Christ-child himself. Thus for the Franciscan, prayer is not

being detached, removed, or separated from the world; on the contrary, it is to feel, witness, become involved and is personal.

What is the relevance of Franciscan prayer today? Can we expect to pray like Francis did? I doubt that even a few people have the freedom and flexibility to spend half their life in prayer in a hermitage. However, I think we can learn from Francis several things. The first is that prayer was fundamental to Francis's understanding of the Christian life. He knew that a healthy combination of prayer and works was non-negotiable. Without prayer, his apostolic work would be flat, draining, and risk becoming self-serving and egotistical. Prayer was his bread that gave him spiritual life. Another thing is that he alternated very well between prayer and work. In today's culture of busyness and 'human doing' rather than 'human being', Francis offers a healthy attitude toward letting things be. The fact that he was willing to leave whatever he was doing for 40 days at a time is striking. I think he knew that any work he did was God's work, not his, and therefore, I don't think he claimed responsibility for it.

So how can we pray as a Franciscan today? Even for those of us who are busy, we can make time to pray. A wise spiritual director once told me that anyone, no matter how busy, can find 15 minutes a day to pray. That is only 1/96<sup>th</sup> of the day. During that time we can pray the Liturgy of the Hours, as Francis did, or pray a rosary. Additionally, we can attend daily Mass, or at least once a week in addition to Sundays. Occasionally, perhaps monthly, we can make a retreat – either for a weekend or perhaps longer once a year.

Another option is a pilgrimage, to which Franciscan prayer very much lends itself. The pilgrim journeys to another place in an effort to witness an historical event and to re-

live it. They hope to experience something in a very real sense, perhaps an emotion, a vision, spiritual renewal, or a resolution to a personal problem. The spiritual places themselves visited can become not just destinations where one prays, but they themselves can become the prayer – the journey itself becomes the prayer. And this is very Franciscan.

In summary, Francis brought the contemplative prayer experience of the monks from the monasteries into the world to the people. He offered common laity the option of having a satisfying spiritual life outside of the cloister. He was not against monasticism; rather he opened the contemplative experience up to everyone. Francis's cloister was the world, and in the real world of creation he experienced God. So many laity were attracted to his way of life that he wrote a Rule for them which would become the Third Order – the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. His understanding of prayer would have a great influence on Ignatius of Loyola, who, in his Spiritual Exercises, would draw heavily on Francis's ideals of meditation in feeling and re-living the historical event. Francis was, without a doubt, a man of prayer, and for him prayer is praise of God's goodness.

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