

Faith and Fraternity in the Figure of St. Francis

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It is important to capture the meaning of an encounter that renews the miracle of our friendship in the places dedicated to the glory of the Saint of Assisi—we who cower before sanctity, not sanctity thought of in terms of a handful of desirous moments, but deeply lived by a man. We want to remember an undertaking that points to a moment of renewal, or, more substantially, a new beginning, a regeneration of Christian life.

But there is no moment in which Christian life ought not be reformed, no moment in which the structure of the Church ought not be renewed, no moment in which the work of conversion can be suspended, interrupted, or put off until tomorrow. Therefore, we are here so that the festive, joyous celebration of the 750th anniversary of the death of Francis of Assisi, this encounter with his memory, might awaken or reawaken in us the desire and enthusiasm of the Christian life and thus convert us.

If we are here, it is so that we might bear within, even if immaturely and inconsistently, the “stigmata” of a word that has awakened us to faith, in the face of which we might be inconsistent a thousand times, but never again forget for our entire lives.

What have we come here to seek if not a story with which to judge the truth of our story, if not the memory of a man and the fraternity born around him in which to see as in a mirror, clearly, the truth of our person, the truth of our company; if not for the possibility of comparing the truth and task of our mission with the great undertaking begun here?

It happened for many of us to begin just as he did, precisely with an encounter: the encounter that evoked the presence of the reality of Christ the Lord. As when, down at the foot of this hill, a word from the Crucifix exposed in the old, broken-down little church of San Damiano, shook Francis up and revealed to him the reality of Christ. And this revelation found two eyes, two ears, two arms, and a heart that took it in.

This is always the beginning of the event of faith: the encounter with a presence manifested in the person of Christ, which arouses something, makes something come forth, provokes a change, and ignites a spark of newness and a truth in life.

We recall that beginning and we remember the conclusion consummated in fidelity to that encounter. There is no other intelligibility, no other meaning of the personal story of Francis of Assisi if not this: he went to the very depths of that which had happened to him. He lived to the full that personal encounter with Christ that brought about the beginning of his story as a new man, a man transformed.

These streets saw this change. And among the people that live here there are many whose ancestors lived it. We are in a land, on streets, in the midst of houses, among trees that lived this real story. There is no corner of this city, there is no rooftop, there is no spot, there is no space, there is no silence that is not a document and testimony to that event. Sanctity as life consummated in fidelity and in abandon without reservation to the event of Christ, to His concrete and experienced company. With all the humanness of which it was made: intelligence, passion, sentiments, and judgments.

And thus a company was born around that miracle (for one has to speak of “miracle” whenever speaking of the beginning of faith and the sanctity that is nothing but the full manifestation of that miracle), around that encounter that fell to the young Francis.

He liked to call it “fraternity.” And in those days, although thirteen centuries had passed since the first Christian company had formed around Jesus Christ, to speak of fraternity or to live a fraternity was a novelty for the world (as it always is, anyway, since there is no fraternity except among those who are made friends and companions through common faith in Jesus Christ).

A passionate company was born, one eminently human, impetuous, utterly fresh, and a bearer of renewal. A human company, pervaded, dominated, and possessed by the sense of His presence. You know: just like it happened to us at the beginning: a sudden freshness, a surprising freedom, a previously unknown sentiment, a new thing. And he desired that as they lived, at root, company with him and among themselves in the name of Christ, thus in the name of Christ and on the strength of that company they would go through the world to carry the proclamation with word and life-testimony.

But to me there are two important observations to make today—with desire, with prayer to the Lord that they might truly touch our hearts—two aspects that directly and personally pertain to us.

The first constitutes the core reason of the substance of the thing born from Francis, the Franciscan movement as a movement of reform, of regeneration of the Church in the tormented situation of that time.

It was not, of course, meant to be such a project or program. Francis did not get up one morning with the decision to reform the Church. The reform of the Church, today as then, cannot be an intellectual project or the program of a group. It is an event of which one becomes aware only in time, the substance of which is in the final attitude of the person: obedience.

All are aware of the passionate dependence of Francis on the Pope and the Church, but this could have been some mere strategy if it had not sprung forth from obedience as a method of life, a deep root and personality structure. One cannot be dependent on hierarchical, institutional authority, cannot live the truth of the mystery of the Church in its historical concreteness, if the attitude with which we live the faith is not ultimately that of obedience.

In fact, just as to him sanctity was obedience to Christ, for his companions it was obedience to Francis. Certainly it was not a facile obedience, neither formal nor pharisaical. It was a substantial, real obedience, and therefore sometimes dramatic and sometimes contradictory; but the structure of Christian experience consists in dependence on an Other. This is why the Franciscan movement was (not without struggles) grafted slowly but vitally onto the great millennial trunk of the Church and is still alive today.

This aspect of the story of Francis and Franciscanism tells us that we can no longer go forward without taking on the obedience of faith as method of life, as a docile hearing that involves us in the objective reality of the proclamation.

The second consideration might seem to you a feature that is not substantial, but in fact it is: in the twelfth century the bourgeois spirit of possession, of power, of earning, had already taken solid root. Francis himself belonged to the merchant class. What meaning did the renunciation of the world made by Francis and his friends have? Indeed, many pages of the documents concerning Franciscan origins use such a formula: “They left the world,” “abandoned the world,” “went away from the world.”¹

¹ [Francis expresses the concept in his writings in three different ways: *renuntiare saeculo* (2 *Letter to the Faithful* 36); *dimittere mundum* (*Regula non bullata* 22:9), *exire de saeculo* (*Testament* 3). When his companions set to writing about twenty years later they prefer the same expression as in the *Testament* (cf. *Assisi Compilation* 51:3; 119:8). Before that, the first biographer, friar Thomas of Celano, uses *renuntiare mundo* (1 *Celano* 109:3). Later, the same writer makes use of a Johannine expression (cf.

What did this gesture mean? It was the departure from the world of mercantilism and possession to enter into the world of poverty and detachment.

The intuition of Francis was that one cannot be a Christian while remaining “of the world.” One cannot live the faith and think as the world does. One cannot practice communion without entering into contradiction with the world’s manner of living. A freedom from the world is necessary, which cannot but bring a detachment, a tearing away that happens in the concreteness of life. It led them to live here on the mountain in thatched huts like those of coal miners and vehemently opposed building houses, consolidating property, and even indirect possession of anything at all; he desired them to be really, concretely, existentially different, as he had first been different.

I think this is the point in which the comparison between him and us is the most painfully negative. We have not yet realized what it means to live today a concrete Christian existence. That is why we are on a pilgrimage that, being the praise of a saint, means contrition and penitence for us.

We must ask forgiveness for our petty hearts that move us to make deals with the world, for our incapacity to live effective freedom from the dominant mindset.

We remain fascinated by the world and fail to develop the intuition of the Franciscan movement, which demands giving life to radically other and new kinds of realities of human society.

We cannot grow and mature in faith if we too do not give a precise face to Christian identity, such that it is not merely chanting the psalms and speaking of spiritual things, but a life different in its material resolutions from that which this society proposes.

John 16:28), *relinquere mundum* (2 Celano 109:10). Bonaventure follows suit (*Evening Sermon on St. Francis in 1255* (*Opera omnia* 9:595, col 1). —Trans.]