

Without Gloss: Francis of Assisi and Western Catholicism

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I WANT TO START WITH A SIMPLE STATEMENT of fact. All Christian life is a paradox. What I mean is this.

In Isaiah 55, God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts [higher] than your thoughts” (8–9). Then in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, “You therefore must be perfect, [even] as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48).

Scripture tells us that God is utterly different from us, vastly higher than us. Then it tells us to become like him. Therein lies the paradox. The task seems impossible. And yet we *know* it to be possible. We know it through the witness of the saints. In Hebrew, God is called *hakadosh*, “the Holy One,” with the word *kadosh* meaning holy. Our English word “saint” derives from the Latin word *sanctus*, which means the same thing: *holy*. Holy does not mean “good,” though holy people are always good and often—though not always—nice. St. Jerome was certainly holy and good, but “nice” might not be the first word that springs to mind in remembering him.

Holy means “other than.” It means different from the world; set apart from the profane; sacred. The saints are ordinary men and women—persons with every kind of talent, weakness and personality—who took a different path, one step at a time, away from the routine hab-

its of the world. They fell in love with God. They followed him. They conformed their lives to him in simple ways that became extraordinary ways. And now their example and their intercession give us hope that we can do the same.

I mention all this because my job here is to consider “St. Francis and Western Catholicism.” And I want to do it by posing three questions: Who is Francis, this pope? Who was Francis, the man of Assisi? And after eight hundred years, what, if anything, can a man from the Middle Ages teach us about being alive and free and human?

So first: Who is Francis, this pope? The short answer is, I do not know. I am not sure anyone really knows yet, outside the Holy Father’s friends and close coworkers. A number of Latin American bishops have told me how different the pope now seems from his years as a bishop in Argentina—much more outgoing and ebullient than they remember. But these are their thoughts, not mine. I did have the privilege of working with him for a month in November and December 1997 when we were both delegates to the Special Assembly for America in Rome. He was an impressive man. He had a keen intelligence, a healthy realism about the problems facing the Church in our hemisphere and a strong emphasis on evangelization. But these are just anecdotes from a long time ago.

I do think we can draw some conclusions from the example he already gives us. He has a deep sense of the continuity of the Church. The respect he shows to Benedict, the Pope Emeritus, literally has no precedent. And his affection for Benedict clearly comes from the heart. On April 27, 2014, he canonized two of his predecessors; the two greatest men of the Second Vatican Council—Pope John XXIII, who had the vision and courage to convene it; and Pope John Paul II, who helped draft some of its key documents and who embedded the meaning of Vatican II in the life of the postconciliar Church.

John XXIII and John Paul II are perfectly paired in sainthood. In canonizing them together, Pope Francis places them as bookends to one of the central events in Catholic life since the Reformation. They were untiring in their discipleship. Zealous in their love of God and God’s people. And also thoroughly human in their complexity.

John XXIII saved Jews from the Holocaust as a Vatican diplomat. He radiated warmth, humor and a concern for peace. He worked a rev-

olution in Catholic thought and life. *And* he also frowned on the worker-priest movement in France and forbade Catholics from voting for the Communist Party. John Paul II helped bring down the Soviet bloc. He worked vigorously for the purity of Catholic teaching. He defended the rights of workers, the suffering and the unborn. *And* he was also a profound shepherd of mercy—a message that runs through his whole pontificate, from his encyclical “Rich in Mercy” to his placing Divine Mercy Sunday on the universal Church calendar.

Pope Francis stands in this line of great recent popes. But in choosing the name “Francis,” he also makes himself distinct from it.

Until now, every pope of the last two hundred years—no matter how gifted or how saintly—has been, in a sense, a prisoner of war. The Church has centered herself in Europe. Every pope in recent history has been a European. And the civil war for Europe’s soul that began before the Enlightenment and ran through the bloodiest century in history—the twentieth century—continues today in Europe’s denial of its Christian roots and its self-destroying battles over marriage, family, sexual identity, and euthanasia.

Europe has exhausted itself. Europe has exhausted the world. And so, when John Paul II called for a “new evangelization,” maybe he spoke more prophetically than he could know. Maybe a genuinely new evangelization can never be achieved except by a new voice with a new spirit from a new world. Pope Francis is no stranger to poverty or violence, the plague of corrupt politics or the cruelty of human trafficking. But neither is he a child of the Old World, with its cynicism and despair, its wars and its hatreds.

Francis seems to be something different. He embodies a Christian spirit older than Europe’s civil war and younger than its fatigue and loss of hope. He is a surprise; disarming, improbable, the kind of man no one could have predicted—a surprise that keeps unfolding into more surprises.

There is something stunning about a pope who—for the first time in history—takes the icon of Christian simplicity and poverty as his namesake, and then tries to live like he means it. There is something exhilarating about a pope who worries about “Christians whose lives seem like

Lent without Easter.”¹ Who warns that “an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral.”² Or who takes a detour in a teaching document to talk in plain language about the mechanics of a good homily.³

I asked above, *Who is Francis, this pope?* The answer is an anomaly. He is a Jesuit with a Franciscan heart. What does that mean?

The early Jesuits played an immense role in the Counter-Reformation and the intellectual renewal of Catholic life. Their legacy goes well beyond the Society of Jesus. It still helps to shape the life of the Church. Our two previous popes—Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger—were world-class, formidable minds by any secular standard.

But we live at a time when science, in the name of reason, seems to undermine the credibility of reason itself. We live in a time that is not just anti-ideological, but in many ways anti-intellectual. It is not that people have forgotten how to think. Rather, too many of us think badly, or just do not like thinking at all. We have no common body of beliefs to inform our public logic and discourse. As Alasdair MacIntyre might say, we are all emotivists now. And religion, when it is not portrayed as a dangerous source of hatred, is cast instead as a kind of organized sentimentality; an outlet for pious good will.

Pope Francis is so intensely popular because he embodies what the world imagines St. Francis was like: a mendicant and troubadour, not a judge and not a scholar. The Holy Father clearly has a sophisticated mind formed in the spirit of Ignatius. But what appeals to the world about Pope Francis are his serenity and informality; his passionate embrace of the poor and the outcast; and his studied avoidance of condemning anyone.

Whether that popularity can last in the face of the pastoral challenges facing the Church is an issue for the future. How the Pope speaks and acts over the next twenty months on matters like marriage, family and sexuality—issues of burning interest to the media of the developed world—will have a big impact on the way he is treated by the press. In the end, popes lead. It is the nature of their ministry. And leaders inev-

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §6.

² *Ibid.*, §10.

³ *Ibid.*, §§137–59.

itably displease somebody; sometimes a great many somebodies. But of course the real St. Francis never turned away from a task simply because it was hard.

That brings me to the second of the three questions I posed for this essay: *Who was Francis, the man of Assisi?*

Francis Bernadone—born in 1181 or 1182, died 1226—has been a magnet for pious stories almost since the day of his death. The wolf of Gubbio is a legend—lovely, but not true. And there is no evidence that the saint ever said, “preach the Gospel always; when necessary use words.” And the famous Prayer of St. Francis—“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace”—dates only to 1912, when it appeared in *La Clochette*, a small French spiritual magazine.

We do rightly remember Francis for his joy and freedom of spirit. These qualities deeply marked the man. And through the man, they have left a lasting mark on Western Christianity. But there was a great deal more to Francis than a gentle love of nature. A Capuchin friend of mine once said that if the real Francis were alive today, quite a few moderns would see him as a religious crank. He was demanding on himself and demanding on his brothers. Poverty, chastity, and obedience are wonderful ideals when we read about them in the foggy past. Living them is another matter. And Francis took his vows and the Rule of his community utterly seriously. He expected his brothers to do the same.

Actually, Francis battled with his brothers quite often, especially when they wanted to water down the inspiration that God had given him. In the year 1221, just a few years after the Franciscan community began, some three thousand friars gathered with Francis for a general chapter. And the ministers—the brothers who led the community—wanted to change the Rule. They wanted to modify it to the times, and make it less demanding.

Francis fought that vigorously. He chose the following verse from Scripture as the theme for his preaching that day: “Blessed be the Lord my God, who trains my hands for war.” He spoke those words to his brothers as he began his sermon. And he won the day. The Rule was later modified anyway, but not that day, because Francis knew how to fight zealously for what he believed was right. Like Mother Teresa and so many other saints all through Church history, Francis was holy and

good and kind—but when it came to matters of faith and principle, he was never soft.

The key to Francis was a kind of holy radicalism. He liked to say that “the saints lived lives of heroic virtue, [but] we are satisfied to talk about them.” Francis himself never felt satisfied with pious words. He wanted to act on the things he believed. He called his brothers to live the Gospel with simplicity and honesty. And that is why he used the words *sine glossa*—“without gloss”—in his Testament. He saw that the Gospel was not complicated, but it *was* demanding and difficult. The theologians and Church lawyers of his day had written commentaries called glosses. And these glosses were very good at either explaining away the hard parts of the Gospel, or diminishing our need to follow Christ’s demands. Francis wanted none of that. He wanted to experience discipleship at its *root*.

Francis lived in an age of political confusion in Europe; a time of the great, inhuman heresy of Catharism in France and Italy, and constant warfare between Christians and Muslims around the Mediterranean. It was also a time of deep corruption and clerical infidelity within the Church. But the medicine Francis used against that corruption was a witness of obedience, encouragement, reverence, and service—not rebellion. He knew instinctively that people are converted by love, not by rejection or fear or anger.

In his biography of Francis, Augustine Thompson—the Dominican author—notes that Francis had a passionate devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. It was the heart of his life. The Mass was the grounding for all his work. There is no way of reinterpreting Francis in generically do-gooder or humanitarian terms. He had hard words for those who oppressed the poor, but even harsher words for those who ignored the Eucharistic presence. Francis had a special horror of

the cheap and tarnished chalices and filthy linens that [many priests of his time] considered good enough for use in worship. Francis’ sense of beauty and decency, which he had mortified by choosing to live amid poverty and outcasts, had not been deadened. Its object was no longer fine garments and meals for himself, but items dedicated to the Lord who died for him.⁴

⁴ Augustine Thompson, O.P., *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

He goes on to say that Francis

demonstrated his devotion [to the Church] by kissing the hands of any priest he met . . . He begged the brothers who met a priest on horseback, especially one carrying the Blessed Sacrament, to kiss the horse's hooves rather than wait for the priest to dismount. Francis wanted that 'subjection to all' which was so much a part of his conversion, to be a lived reality among the brothers.

Again: Who was Francis, the man of Assisi? G. K. Chesterton, his other great biographer, put it in these words:

St. Francis [was] a Lover. He was a Lover of God and he was really and truly a Lover of men . . . [And] as St. Francis did not love humanity but men, so he did not love Christianity but Christ . . . [To Francis] his religion was not a thing like a theory, but a thing like a love affair . . . What gave him his extraordinary personal power was this: that from the Pope to the beggar, from the Sultan of Syria in his pavilion to the ragged robbers crawling out of the wood, there was never a man who looked into those brown burning eyes without being certain that Francis Bernadone was really interested in him; in his own individual inner life from the cradle to the grave; that he himself was being valued and taken seriously and not being added to the spoils of some social policy or the names in some clerical document.⁵

This is the love that the apostles must have seen when they looked into the eyes of Jesus. It is the love, I suspect, that Pope Francis wants people to see in the eyes of every Christian and in every element of Catholic life.

That brings us to the third and final question I posed here: After eight hundred years, *what, if anything, can a man from the Middle Ages teach us about being alive and free and human?* That term "Middle Ages" is a curious one. It is implicitly negative. It consigns an entire civilization to a kind of trough between waves. And it fits perfectly with the

University Press, 2012), 61.

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, in *St. Thomas Aquinas/St. Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 196–97, 266–67.

vanity, the ignorance, and the amnesia of the modern era—an era that clings to its delusion that reason precludes religious faith, in the same way drowning sailors grab for a life raft.

The philosopher Rémi Brague once wrote that “Christianity was founded by people who could not have cared less about ‘Christian civilization.’ What mattered to them was Christ, and the reverberations of his coming on the whole of human existence. Christians believed in Christ, not in Christianity itself; they were Christians, not ‘Christianists.’”⁶

We need to remember that simple lesson. The Catholic faith is not an ideology. It is a romance. It is a love affair with God. We are a people who believe in Jesus Christ—not the ideas, but the *person* of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for our sake purely out of his love for us. And living the Catholic faith should be an experience of gratitude and joy that flows from a daily *personal* encounter with God’s son and a *communal* relationship with God’s people.

There is a reason the Church calls St. Francis the *vir Catholicus*, the exemplary Catholic man. Francis understood that gratitude is the beginning of joy, and that joy in this world is the aroma of heaven in the next. He reveled in the debt he owed to God for the beauty of creation, for his friends and brothers, and for every gift and suffering that came his way. He treasured his dependence on the love of others, and returned their love with his own. He gave away all that he had in order to gain the deepest kind of freedom—the freedom to pursue God, to share God with others, and to experience life without encumbrance or fear.

Maybe the best thing we can do is to compare what we know about Francis with the terrain of American life all around us—terrain we adults, including we adults in the Church, helped to create. We worship autonomy. We are jealous of our time and our privacy. Our economy runs on a steady catechesis of entitlement and dissatisfaction. And billions are spent every year on a nonstop creation of one new appetite after another. That is not living. That is not even really human.

A young married friend once quipped that having fun is to joy, as having sex is to love—they ought to go together in a rightly ordered way. And when they do, life is beautiful. But too often they just do not,

⁶ Rémi Brague, *The Legend of the Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism and Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 21–22.

because fun and sex become things to take, things to consume. And joy and love can only grow in a heart that gives.

Acquisitiveness makes us poorer and hungrier in the only things that matter. In turning away from that kind of life, Francis became fully alive; a man free to think and act without excuses, without compromise, without glosses to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ more comfortable and less liberating. Here is the point: We can make the same choices Francis did, one person, one family, one Christian community at a time. And if we do, that begins a revolution, the only kind that achieves anything that endures. Our continued interest in St. Francis is the proof. Eight centuries after he died, here we are, still moved and still drawn to the life of an Italian poor man in rags. So are millions of others.

Scripture says, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well" (Mt 6:33). We need to consider two simple questions: First, do we believe the Word of God or not? And second, if we do believe, then what are we going to do about it? We renew the witness of the Church, not with techniques or programs or resources, but with the zeal and purity and obedience of our own lives. That path leads to the kind of freedom and joy that no one could ever take from Francis, and no one can ever take from us.

From the cross at San Damiano, Jesus said to Francis: "Repair my house, which is falling into ruin." Those same words are meant for every Christian life and home and parish. How we respond is up to us. **N&V**

