

St. Francis and Pope Francis *

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First Things

New York, NY

OUR WORLD IS TAKEN by Pope Francis. I would guess that if we were to stop one hundred random people on the street and ask them about the Catholic Church, we would get a few thumbs up, but mostly ambivalence bordering on dislike or at least distrust. Indeed, some are likely to express an articulate hostility. And yet, ask them about the current pope, and, if my secular friends and relatives are any indication, I would venture the responses will be significantly more positive. Whether the ugly body rust of the sex-abuse scandals or bitterness over the Church's intransigent refusal to conform the new consensus on sex, marriage, and the family—or simply the general impulse in our society to hit the mute button on religion—Catholicism generally rankles. By contrast, the pope pleases and brings a smile.

This is so because our Jesuit pope has many Franciscan qualities that arouse something deep within us. The original celebrity, Francis, was and remains a central archetype in the Western spiritual imagination. When we see his form embodied, however imperfectly, however partially, we tend to swoon, which is exactly what has happened. Here, for example, are a few Franciscan parallels between St. Francis and Pope Francis that may explain, at least in part, his general popularity.

As we marinate in irony, the direct bluntness and simplicity of St.

* This essay was originally delivered as a talk at the Catholic Center at New York University at a conference on St. Francis sponsored by *First Things* and the Thomistic Institute.

Francis bring us up short, and at the same time his compassion reassures us that if we have the courage to show ourselves in our spiritual nakedness we will not be shamed, ridiculed or mocked. The current pope represents to us something of this powerful combination of immediate, unmediated demand and warm consolation. His famous “who I am to judge” response to a question about homosexuality can be interpreted as Franciscan in this way, especially when paired with his earlier remarks as cardinal that gay marriage is “of the devil.” I would submit that it is the Franciscan sense of his statement—the consolation of solidarity in an atmosphere of heightened spiritual demands—that encourages many liberal Catholics who, interestingly, do not believe he will change the Church’s teaching. (This stands in contrast to the secular media, which cannot see anything other than affirmation in any pastoral expression of the enduring welcome of God’s forgiving love.)

Moreover and more importantly, St. Francis embodies the tremendous power of humility and renunciation—an alluring, bewitching possibility in our age of grasping accumulation. From the moment of his presentation to the world as newly elected, this pope’s many public gestures have evoked the way of lowliness. His decision to wash the feet of prisoners on his first Holy Thursday as pope provides an obvious example. But more powerful, I think, has been his renunciation of papal isolation. Unique among major leaders, he moves through the world without the thick security buffer that separates the Davos worthies from everybody else.

And then there is a third Franciscan charism—unpredictability and a general disregard for the mundane requirements of institutional continuity. Pope Francis manifests these qualities as well. It gives many secularists and liberals hope that he will toss over centuries of magisterial teaching about the hot-button issues secularists and liberal care about, which pretty much boil down to sex and erasing the male-female difference. It also gives people like me heartburn, just as St. Francis did many centuries ago.

But I am becoming *ad hoc*, and perhaps a little *ad hominem*. Therefore I want to step back and probe more deeply the Franciscan archetype. It is about more than simplicity and compassion, much more than foregoing a fancy Mercedes for a plain Jane Ford or being kind to animals. If we have a clearer picture of what makes St. Francis so import-

ant in the Western spiritual imagination, we can return to Pope Francis and ask two questions. First, what does Jorge Bergoglio's unprecedented choice of Francis as the name for his pontificate foretell about what he discerns as the Church's greatest need today? And, second, what does it say about twenty-first-century America that we find a pope named Francis so attractive?

Fr. Augustine Thompson has worked to distinguish the historical Francis from the image of the saint that animates the popular imagination. In this essay, however, I want to stick with the Francis of faith rather than the Francis of history. It is this figure that St. Bonaventure presents in his *Life of Saint Francis*. There his identity has little to do with the emerging mercantile culture of medieval Italy or the particulars of life in Umbria. Instead, Bonaventure presents him as a "herald of gospel perfection." This is so because St. Francis embodies two important theological truths: poverty and literalism.

Poverty is a biblical motif we could say (rightly) that St. Francis "owns" in the West. Bonaventure returns to this theme again and again. The great saint is a lover of "holy poverty"; he embraces "sublime poverty," queen of the virtues and root of perfection. "None was ever so greedy of gold as he of poverty," writes Bonaventure, "nor did any man ever guard treasure more anxiously than he this Gospel pearl." As Dante describes, Francis weds himself to Lady Poverty, an image meant to draw upon and transform Boethius's description of Lady Wisdom. In Francis we learn that matrimony to poverty is the surest path to God.

Bonaventure gives an extensive catalogue of St. Francis's ever-renewed commitment to poverty. He declares it the foundation of his order, insisting that his followers accept the most stringent conditions rather than allow themselves to be seduced by the illusion that any degree of wealth is consistent with gospel purity. Bonaventure recounts an incident on the road where St. Francis refused to pick up a purse full of coins that his brethren wished to use to give to the poor, correctly seeing it as a snare of the devil. When invited to dine with bishops, he begs crusts of bread in advance of the meal. One Easter at an isolated hermitage there were no neighbors to beg from, so St. Francis resorted to asking his fellow friars for alms. In all things St. Francis took the way of renunciation, always seeking self-emptying and dispossession rather than possession.

Poverty is closely connected to the second Franciscan motif, which is literalism. The great saint's spiritual imagination is no more richly adorned than were his humble hermitages. Just as he stripped off life's softening luxuries, he removed anything that might soften God's word. His call first came in a dream. He saw himself among gathered soldiers emblazoned with the sign of the Cross—and so he immediately presented himself to a local count to serve as a soldier. At this point, a divine voice intervenes, telling him, in effect, that he should not be an idiot. The dream was meant to be interpreted spiritually, not literally! And St. Francis does exactly that. He sees that we cannot serve Christ unless we achieve a victory over ourselves—and then redoubles his literalism by immediately applying the teachings of Jesus to his life: "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff." (It was only after receiving the stigmata that St. Francis could be convinced to wear sandals, in this instance as a humble hiding of the richness of divine grace.)

A similar literalism characterizes his response to a voice speaking to him from the cross of Christ in the dilapidated Church of St. Damian. It said, "Go and repair my House." So he sets about to raise funds, triggering thereby the confrontation with his father that leads to his disinheritance, thus providing the divine inheritance of poverty and securing the literal fulfillment of Jesus's teaching that you will be hated by your mother and father for his sake. The bull-headed literalism of his response to the divine voice brings him to an almost absurd state. Stripped of all financial resources, he is reduced to carrying uncut stones to the church to contribute to its rebuilding. Just so does Francis take on the form of Christ most fully. The spiritual meaning of the Gospel is the literal meaning of Christ's way of the Cross.

The literalism of St. Francis and his poverty go together, as St. Bonaventure makes clear in his carefully stylized account of how St. Francis was called to follow Christ, received the charism of holy poverty, and founded his order. This linkage is not simply a narrative one—the fact that by trying to rebuild the churches near Assisi, St. Francis set in motion the sequence of events that led to the confrontation with his father, dispossession, and recapitulation of Christ's burden carrying love. There is also an important conceptual link: both testify to the immedi-

ate availability of obedience to God's command. Put differently, both demonstrate the real possibility of holiness.

It is easy for us to mock literalism as a plank in the fundamentalist platform. This is a mistake, for literalism encourages a disposition toward the Word of God that prevents us from hiding in a self-generated fog. Some years ago I was with an academic friend. He is a game theorist with a skeptical mind. He is also a conservative Protestant. As he explained his work with a prison ministry in Texas, I found myself somewhat surprised and asked him why he was involved. He looked at me and said, "Well, more than a decade ago I realized that when Jesus tells us to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, and visit the prisoner, he actually means it. And there are prisoners in Texas. So I signed up to visit them."

The literalism of St. Francis is like my friend's—and it makes God's commands immediate. The same goes for his spiritual imagination more broadly. St. Francis did not have a conceptual mind and did not think in terms of *kenosis* or the "metaphysics of gift" or the notion of "cruciform existence." Instead, St. Francis interpreted what it means to be Christ-like in a literal way. Again, Dante sees with clarity. In the *Paradiso*, Francis loses all the particularity of his life and become a pure allegory of Christ. The theological insight is powerful: to be spiritualized, to be supernaturalized, is to become a perfect mirror of Christ, which means to imitate and conform to him in a literal way. Put somewhat differently: in St. Francis we see that the most spiritual reading of the passion narrative is a literal one. Thus St. Francis is most fully "supernaturalized" when he received the stigmata, the grace of the most literal possible conformity to Christ on the cross.

The immediacy of poverty is easier to explain and in many ways much more powerful. It is a spiritual ideal we can achieve in an instant—if we will but do so. Poverty requires no resources, no talents, no achievements, no status, no family connections. Anyone can wed himself to Lady Poverty. Nothing stands in the way—except, of course, for our unwillingness to take the way of renunciation. And because poverty is the form Christ takes, to say that poverty is immediately accessible is to say that a deep conformity to Christ is immediately accessible, which is to say that a supernatural life in God is immediately accessible. As St. Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans (paraphrasing somewhat), we do

not need to wait around for just the right set of dogmas to be defined or spiritual disciplines to be fine-tuned. No, as Moses teaches, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.”

When Jesus tells the rich young man that he must sell all his possession and give the money to the poor, the immediacy of literalism and poverty come together. There is no ambiguity about the command—and there is no impediment whatsoever to its being obeyed, no impediment, that is, except for the greatest one, which is our ongoing acquiescence to, even positive affirmation of, our bondage to sin and death. Moreover, it is important to remember why Jesus commands the way of poverty to the rich young man. It is for the sake of perfection, which is to say for supernatural life in God.

The Franciscan interpretation of this parable sees the perfection obedience promises as conformity with Christ’s self-sacrificial love. We are deified insofar as we are made Christ-like, insofar as we drink the cup he drinks. By my reading of our tradition in the West, this interpretation has become canonical, at least tacitly so. The most fundamental influence of St. Francis has been to make poverty—a profoundly Cross-centered mode of life—the paradigmatic Western mode of *theosis*. Instead of the icon of the Pantocrator, in the West we fix upon what St. Bonaventure describes as the superluminous darkness of the cross. For this reason, it is the begging friar in his rude habit who becomes an indispensable aide to contemplation. We are bewitched by St. Francis, because in him we see the face of Christ.

Pope Francis is a Jesuit, not a Franciscan. Nevertheless, the name he has chosen indicates that he wishes his pontificate to draw upon the charism of St. Francis. (This is by no means at odds with the Jesuit tradition. St. Ignatius himself wished to imitate the heroic sanctity of St. Francis.) This charism involves much more than making the poor the focal point of concern, which is after all a perennial commitment of the Church. Pope Francis consistently offers himself as a servant, not a prince. This has been the trajectory of the papacy over the last generation or two. (One thinks of John XXIII’s refusal to be carried in St. Peter’s on the papal throne, and John Paul I’s refusal of the papal crown.) But with Pope Francis the renunciations of supereminence are more emphatic. It was much reported that as the Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires he rode to work on the bus. Since his election he has refused

the papal apartment and Prada shoes. These are symbolic, of course, but symbols matter. Recently, a Protestant friend spoke to me about a recent meeting he attended in Rome. A papal audience was arranged. He was moved by the fact that Francis asked the group of academics to pray for him. My friend intuitively grasped the mendicant spirit of the request. Pope Francis engages in a spiritual mode of begging.

Pope Francis also echoes St. Francis's literalism. He is given to blunt, spontaneous statements. His homiletical style is unadorned, and *Evangelii Gaudium*, the recent apostolic exhortation, is straightforward. I cannot imagine him embarking on a series of sermons of the sort that were as intellectually ambitious as John Paul II's on the theology of the body. Nor can I see him writing theologically rich and evocative encyclicals, as did Benedict. Pope Francis seems the vicar of simple Gospel truths simply stated. And he often bears witness to them more eloquently in deed than in speech—a good Franciscan tradition.

The unadorned style and rhetorical directness of Pope Francis is itself a mode of poverty. The Church has a rich intellectual tradition—artistic, philosophical, and theological. But the current pope seems to largely renounce its use, not for the sake of launching some sort of new tradition, as many did after Vatican II—Rahner, Lonergan— but for the sake of a kind of rhetorical poverty, a stripping-down of the Church's witness to straightforward Gospel truths. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

I speculate, therefore, that Jorge Bergoglio's choice of Francis reflects his reading of the signs of the times. Put simply: the age of Christianity's reign over culture and society in the West has come to an end. Perhaps we have a few small and pleasant fiefs. We can gather in places like the Catholic Center at New York University: little Lichtensteins in the great empire of the modern secular university. But for the most part we have neither place nor voice. Whether we like it or not, we are impoverished. In this context, the message of Pope Francis seems to speak against the idea that we should form a robust counterculture. Instead, he seems to envision the Church in a mendicant mode. Rather than building a neo-scholastic redoubt, we are to bear witness in our poverty. Instead of St. Benedict, we are to imitate St. Francis.

This is of course a false dichotomy. We need be able to give an account of the hope that is within us—and do so in articulate, intellec-

tually sophisticated ways. But, as I have tried to show, the Franciscan charism of poverty is one of immediacy. While we must surely renew and rebuild the intellectual life of the Church, we can conform ourselves to Christ right now. We can bear witness right now. There is nothing about the poverty of our cultural dispossession and our intellectual marginality that prevents us from saying, "The Lord is risen." In fact, it is perhaps easier.

What does it say about our age that the Franciscan gestures of Pope Francis so enrapture people? Poverty has a perennial spiritual power. In his account of the life of St. Francis, Bonaventure frequently draws attention to this. It seduces cardinals and tames wild beasts. It softens the hearts of Saracens. That is true today as well. Pope Francis's simplicity romances the editors of the *New York Times*.

That said, perhaps our age has a special need for the Franciscan witness. We live in a paradoxical time of expansive possibilities combined with a feeling that life is a long trudge toward a distant, inaccessible goal. This contrasts with the leitmotif of Bonaventure's life of St. Francis, which is the nearness and immediacy. St. Francis needed only the will to answer the divine call

Let me give two examples.

Although we are coddled to an unprecedented degree—warm, well fed, entertained, ministered to by modern medicine—we are anxious and fearful. Perhaps because we are aware of how *much* we have to lose, our first impulses are toward self-protection, which we do through accumulation. When we are young, we build our resumes, accumulating as many credentials as possible. Then we set out to accumulate wealth. In all this, it is striking how much we think we need—and it is even more striking how deeply we are motivated by fear. Getting a college degree has become a "necessity." We scramble for credentials that are not so much stepping stones to a goal we aspire to as so many layers of armor that will protect us from economic peril.

The habit of irony in our time is powerful cultural expression of this impulse toward self-protection. Irony creates a safe distance between us and our social contexts. It is a way of being with others without revealing oneself, a way of clothing one's existential nakedness. "Whatever" has become a dismissive gesture that insulates us from the emotional dangers of disappointment.

In any event, we feel trapped. In some sense, that has always been true. Modern capitalism did not invent greed, and if our age is uniquely preoccupied with accumulating wealth, it is because we have relaxed our attitude toward honor and status, a fixation that enflamed men in earlier centuries. Moreover, we are all pinioned by death. But our age intuits something perverse about our current entrapment. Surrounded by unprecedented wealth, we fear deprivation. In an age of hypercommunication, we fear revealing ourselves to others.

In this context of fear—and I want to emphasize that we are motivated by fear today much more than a grasping ambition—the pope’s Franciscan qualities have a special resonance. The Holy Father’s gestures of poverty and his blunt style remind us that what we desire—the joy of genuine freedom and fullness of life—are right there for the taking. They are immediately available. We need only say “yes” to Christ’s clear words: “Take up your cross and follow me.”



