

‘Living a Life of Simplicity?’

A Response to Francis of Assisi by Adrian House

Francis’s life was dedicated to the exact imitation of Christ. ‘Christ was his compass and God his magnetic north’. He took literally Jesus’s demand that his followers give up all earthly possessions. ‘Take nothing for your journey’. The first friars had an incredibly hard life of privation, which the later ones did not follow. So did he ask of human nature what was impossible to sustain? He treated his own body, ‘Brother Ass’ as something to be despised, constantly trying to slough off the very last shreds of self regard, which he believed separated him from his Creator. These friars whom Francis had close to him and inspired with his beliefs shared his vision. There was an admirable keeping to the Gospel as there was an energy of love, derived from their worship together. In his penitence and resolve to lead a new life, Francis achieved a true holiness, as did many of them. They needed and took long periods of undisturbed prayer away from the world.

However, as the Order grew large numbers of friars were unable to have such contact with Francis. He could no longer scrutinise them before they took vows and perhaps some of them joined for the wrong reasons. They did not share his vision, and wanted the Order to be similar to other Orders, with a secure lifestyle. This was a great sorrow to Francis. He longed to maintain the life of simplicity of the early days.

Francis’s founding of the Order of Brothers and Sisters of Penance at Cannara is a success story which has stood the test of time. It seems that following ‘in spirit’ the principles of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience has been easier than a literal adherence. Men and women pressed to join the Order which was ‘the least susceptible to clerical interference, the least in need of Francis’s protection, and the only one to give him unalloyed pleasure at the end of his life’. This Third Order allowed people to live in their own homes and support their families. Should we be giving up all for Christ? This is a question which interests me greatly: is it enough to be following our Lord as only part of our everyday life? Francis advocated total commitment. Few are coming forward to join the 1st and 2nd Orders today, whereas the Third Order is still growing.

The early friars’ devotion to God, the Rule and each other were intense. ‘Their personal faith had to be well enough developed to withstand the doubts, confusion and fears they would encounter on a journey, alone on a mountain, in hostile country, a mocking crowd or a storm at sea.’ Francis achieved these results in them by his single mindedness, and divine inspiration.

And he loved them. To one he said ‘The more you are tempted the more I will love you.’ The spiritual light coming from him towards his companions contained a mix of frequencies – ‘physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual into a single beam’ – burning out the last traces of ego. Perhaps never has there been such a shepherd and a flock, since the time of Our Lord? He saw work as a form of prayer: their prayer, work and preaching were inseparable. What a man he must have been! ‘His dazzling spirit and love bound

them to him..’ Like a Pied Piper he attracted people. Jacques de Vitry wrote at the time of the Crusade in Egypt how ‘Francis was loved by God and venerated by all men and that he, himself, was having difficulty holding onto his people, who were joining him. ‘He emanated an almost radioactive energy which seemed to derive from his sense of continuous proximity to God’. He did not just love God, but was in love with him, and his luminescent conviction was infectious. United, the friars discovered a collective trust, purpose and happiness’ Have we lost all that?

On his return from the Crusade in 1220 he had a dream, while on an island near Venice about ‘a small black hen with fluffy legs and feet’ who had so many chicks that she was quite unable to shelter or control them. Francis believed that he was that hen ‘by nature small and black...The Lord has given me, and will continue to, many children whom I cannot protect by my own strength: I must therefore put them under the control of our holy mother, the church.’ He decided that he must let them go, so at the Michaelmas Chapter he stood down as Vicar General.

A factor which made it hard for Francis to maintain the Order as he conceived it was church opposition. For rigidly orthodox bishops and cardinals like Ugolino, the Pope was their compass, and Church dogma their pole. Even within the order, Elias and others were ‘sidling towards dictates of church dogma.’ Francis did not give in easily: for the Michaelmas Chapter in 1221 he prefaced his Rule with ‘Blessed be the Lord my God, who trains my hand for the fight. He was asked again and again to adopt a conventional pattern, but said ‘God has called me to follow the way of simplicity. The Lord told me he wished me to be a new kind of fool.’ In 1222 he wrote a revised Rule at Fonte Colombo. Elias had been sent to remonstrate by the majority of friars. Francis raised his eyes saying ‘Lord, didn’t I tell you that they wouldn’t believe you?’ The voice of Christ was heard replying ‘Francis, there is nothing of yours in the Rule, it is all mine. I want the Rule to be observed to the letter, to the letter, to the letter, and without gloss, without gloss, without gloss.’ This is the Rule which has survived 800 years. It is clear, practical, but no longer personal. It shrunk from 24 chapters to 12. The quotations were cut from over 100 to only 11: it was his last great gift to his order.

As Franciscan tertiaries, we say in our Office ‘and kindle in us the fire of your love’. Francis had the ‘fire of love’: do we have it? Or was he so much a saint that no one else can quite follow him? Is it necessary to keep the body in such subjection as he did, and give up earthly pleasures? Ugolino observed, at the Chapter of the Mats, how the friars had for beds hollows scooped in the earth with a handful of straw, and asked ‘What will become of the rest of us, miserably addicted to all our excesses.’ He recognized that, with almost all churchmen at that time, he was a long way from Gospel living. And are we, too, a long way from the Gospel? Ugolino genuinely loved both Francis and Clare. His decision to release the friars from their vow of absolute poverty, in order to keep up the momentum of their growth, may have been wrong. Or, since the Order still exists and millions visit Assisi each year, it may have been right. We have an example of how to live a life of simplicity, even if we do not do so, and his influence is worldwide today.

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