

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

St. Francis is one of the most revered saints of all time, and volumes upon volumes have been written about him. Yet, though he is known for his intense spirituality, it is still difficult to write about his explicit spiritual practices. He left no specific expositions of his spiritual life, and provided no explicit plans for spiritual exercises or methods of prayer.¹ However, the person of St. Francis is known and described in his biographies, and his life – whole and complete – is in itself a spiritual practice to God. From his caring of the poor to his adoration of nature to his fervent times of prayer, all of his actions were an act of worship. His life, a combination of the contemplative and the active, is a Christian model of holistic spiritual living even for today.

Intimacy through prayer

To Francis, being with Christ was a love affair. When referring to his relationship with God, he called himself “a spouse of the Holy Spirit.”² To cultivate his intimacy with the Divine, he often retreated to remote places to pray and contemplate alone with God. He loved being alone with His

¹ *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, Translated and Introduction by Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 5.

² *Office of the Passion*, Compline, Antiphone, 2; *Form of Life Given to Saint Clare and Her Sisters*, 1; *The First Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, I, 7; *The Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, 50, quoted by Armstrong and Brady, 16.

Father so much that, at times, he was torn between devoting himself completely to the contemplative instead of the active life.³

Prayer was his chief comfort. It was Francis' starting place, his source of strength in faith. God was his refuge on whom he could cast all of his cares and burdens. He was completely dependent on the Lord, and he understood that progress in God's service was futile without prayer. In fact, he placed prayer at the highest pinnacle of all of the spiritual exercises and used every means to have his friars concentrate on it.⁴ He eagerly sought to pray to God without ceasing, to keep his soul always in the presence of God. Bonaventure witnesses:

Prayer was his sure refuge in everything he did; he never relied on his own efforts, but put his trust in God's loving providence and cast the burden of his cares on him in insistent prayer. He was convinced that the grace of prayer was something a religious should long for above all else. No one, he declared, could make progress in God's service without it.⁵

And, Francis' prayers were not detached or antiseptic requests, but instead his prayers were often passionate and cries from the soul. Bonaventure writes:

Francis would make the groves re-echo with his sighs and bedew the ground with his tears, as he beat his breast and conversed intimately with his Lord in hidden secrecy. Here he defended himself before his Judge; here he spoke with his Lover.⁶

Intimacy with God was the foremost priority for Francis, being in love with the One who loved him first.

The busy ministers of the modern age could learn much through Francis' example. His priorities were in line with the will of God. He placed his relationship with the Savior as his foremost concern, above ministry strategies and scholastic exercises. As a man whom God used to

³ Stephen Clissold, *The Wisdom of St. Francis and His Companions* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1978), 17.

⁴ Bonaventure, "Major Life of St. Francis," in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, edited by Marion A. Habig, 3rd Edition (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 705.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 706.

bring widespread renewal to the Christian faith, he desired most of all to be at the feet of his Father, seeking intimacy, guidance and nourishment through solitary prayer.

Welcoming the Holy Spirit

Often, while praying, St. Francis would be rapt in ecstasy. Whenever he felt the Spirit approaching, he would always welcome Him, enjoying the “inspiration” for as long as God permitted.⁷

His ecstasy would come in different forms, often experiencing what was beyond human reason. One time, he fell into a trance and rode through the town of Borgo San Sepulcro like a corpse, while the townspeople touched and pulled him, even cutting off little pieces of his tunic as souvenirs. After leaving the town, Francis asked when they would be arriving at the city they had just ridden through!⁸ Ecstasies of this sort would also occur in community, where he and his companions “were rapt out of themselves, and lay on the ground like dead men, completely unconscious.”⁹

Near the end of his life, Francis went up Mount La Verna to pray and to reflect on the Passion of Christ, and he prayed and meditated for three weeks straight. He desired to share in Christ’s sufferings, and the result of his prayers was the appearance of the *stigmata* on his body, the marks which resembled the wounds caused by the nails and spear on the Crucified Christ.

Francis’ biographers have written about many more mystical vignettes that have occurred throughout the life of this saint. These experiences mark Francis intimacy with God, and his sensitivity to the workings of the Holy Spirit. They did not supersede his orthodox beliefs, but

⁶ *Ibid.*, 707.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 706.

⁸ Thomas of Celano, “The Second Life of St. Francis,” In *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, edited by Marion A. Habig, 3rd Edition (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 443.

⁹ “The Little Flowers of St. Francis,” In *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, edited by Marion A. Habig, 3rd Edition (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 1331.

merely enhanced his intimate relationship with the Spirit. A life of orthodoxy need not exclude the visible outworking of the Holy Spirit. Francis' faith was much more than a heady theology, but a spiritual life that was also lived out and supernaturally experienced.

Worshipping through nature

St. Francis would often experience mystical experiences through nature as well. In nature, he would see the beauty of His creator. Armstrong writes of Francis:

*A Christian nature mystic is therefore one whose mystical experience, whatever form it may take, is based on Christian beliefs and involves an appreciation of Creation as God's handiwork.*¹⁰

The whole of nature was a sacrament, where Francis would find himself in an ecstasy of prayer with eyes raised to heaven while holding a waterfowl in his hands.¹¹ The world and all of its beauty was considered a gift from God.

Sometimes however, his reverence for nature would reach extremes, treating God's creation with radical reverence. Once, he was sitting close to a fire, and when his undergarments were caught aflame, he refused to put out the fire, saying "Dearest brother, do not hurt Brother fire!"¹² Other times, his love for water made him wash his hands where the water would not be trodden underfoot, and his love for rocks made him walk on them reverently and fearfully, out of love for Christ who is called the Rock.¹³

In our world of consumption, where the resources of nature are blighted and abused, Francis stands out as an anomaly. Though his behaviors border on the extreme, his love for creation

¹⁰ Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic: The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973), 16.

¹¹ Bonaventure, 694-695.

¹² "Mirror of Perfection," In *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, edited by Marion A. Habig, 3rd Edition (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 1255.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1256-1257.

— and for the Creator — is evident through his actions. For Francis, creation was not a god in itself, but an avenue in worshipping the True God. Armstrong writes, “For him nature spoke of God.”¹⁴ And out of love for the Father, he treated God’s creation with the utmost respect, taking care of the world God has given mankind to tend.

His view of the Bible

St. Francis brought an experiential level to the study of Scripture as well. He believed that the Bible should not merely be learned, but experienced and lived out. He distrusted Biblical scholarship of his times, though he was not completely disavowing the study of the Bible. One time, Francis himself demanded the assistance of brothers learned in the Bible and skilled in the use of language,¹⁵ and he quoted extensively from Scripture, thereby exhibiting his own predilections to the study of the Word.

However, he does consider book-learning a real temptation, puffing up the mind.¹⁶ The Word should be studied, but prayer and self-sacrifice are the necessary pre-conditions for scholarly activity, so that each word is received with humility.¹⁷ The scholar of Scripture should not seek the knowledge of the Word as an end of itself. Instead, the Bible should not merely be learned, but its commandments should be obeyed. Francis writes:

A man has been killed by the letter when he wants to know quotations only so that people will think he is very learned and he can make money to give to his relatives and friends. A religious has been killed by the letter when he has no desire to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but wants to know what it says only so that he can explain it to others.¹⁸

¹⁴ Armstrong, “Nature Mystic,” 11.

¹⁵ Anton Rotzetter, “Mysticism and Literal Observance of the Gospel in Francis of Assisi,” In *Francis of Assisi Today*, translated by Robert Nowell, edited by Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

This is an indictment of much of theological education today! The study of the Word must be taken as a spiritual exercise, meant for changing the soul, for cleansing the heart. Theological students today easily forget to pray before studying, ignore the application of their homework into their lives, and turn their studies into drudgery instead of a spiritual act of worship. Though Francis' exegetical processes may be in want, his heart was absolutely correct. The Scripture was not written merely to be learned and spoken about, but it is to be lived out in the lives of Christians. Ultimately, the Scriptures are interpreted through Christian living. Rotzetter writes:

To put it another way, Franciscan exegesis takes the risk of venturing into the realm of practical living before everything has been thought out and made safe. It makes the experiment of living with and from the gospel and experiences its spiritual character in action.¹⁹

Christian freedom and challenge

His interpretation of the Bible affected his thinking of his spiritual life. He hated legalism and resisted writing specific rules of spiritual living; he wanted his friars to live a life of simplicity and humility. Not wanting to quench the workings of the Spirit by legalistic trappings, he desired instead the spiritual dynamism and freedom which encouraged life and imagination. Little is explicitly forbidden to the friars.²⁰ Francis responded to some of them who wanted more specific rules and regulations:

"My brothers, my brothers, God called me to walk in the way of humility and showed me the way of simplicity. I do not want to hear any mention of the rule of St. Augustine, or St. Bernard, or of St. Benedict. The Lord has told me that he wanted to make a new fool of me in the world, and God does not want to lead us by any other knowledge than that. God will use your personal knowledge and your wisdom to confound you."²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹ "Legend of Perugia." In *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, edited by Marion A. Habig, 3rd Edition (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 1088-1089.

On the other hand, Francis also observed the Scripture as literally as possible. For example "Do not worry about tomorrow"²² was taken seriously in a radical manner. The brothers, instead of putting their beans to soak in warm water the day before they were to be eaten as was the custom, they would soak them on the day itself. Similarly they did not accept more alms than they could use on a given day.²³ Thus, Francis lived according to the Word in a radical manner.

The freedom of Christian grace and the challenge of Christian living were intertwined. Instead of falling into the trap of legalism or liberalism, Francis finds an excellent medium, combining both freedom and challenge. He sought the challenge of applying Christian principle to his life, yet found freedom in its expression.

Life of voluntary poverty

His literal approach to the Bible caused Francis to live a life of poverty. In 1208, his father took him before the local bishop to demand that justice be done: he wanted Francis to return his goods. Francis, without prompting or urging, disrobed in front of the bishop, saying that he could now say in complete honesty and without reserve, "Our Father who art in heaven."²⁴ This was the beginning of his avowal of possessions.

At a mass on February 24, 1208, it was made even more clear. The words of St. Matthew convicted him to the heart: "Take no gold or silver or copper in your wallet, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics or sandals or a staff..." Francis obeyed his calling to absolute poverty, wandering through towns and villages to preach the gospel. He stressed the adoration of God, repentance, generosity, and the forgiveness of wrongs done to each other. He gave his heart out to

²² Matthew 6:34 NIV.

²³ Rotzetter, 57.

²⁴ Bonaventure, 643.

the poor, befriending them and preaching the gospel. His main overarching passion was to imitate Christ, and his poverty was to be the way of life for Francis. Clissold writes:

Francis passionately believed that the love of material possessions lay at the root of society's ills and of man's estrangement from his maker. Property implied the need for arms with which to defend it, and led to the struggle for power and prestige and to the chronic warfare which was the scourge of his times.²⁵

But, in his self-denial, Francis did not have a morbid hatred of self that other ascetics often had.²⁶ Though he slept on the ground, ate little, kept long vigils throughout the night, lived in shabby clothing, and gave away everything he had, we could not picture him sitting on a pillar or laden with heavy chains. He forbid friars to be too harsh with their penances, and had some penitential instruments confiscated for their caused injury, even death.²⁷ The self-denial was about following Christ, not hating the self whom God created.

Especially within the affluence of American culture, it is easy to follow the crowd and fall into the sin of materialism and hoard the wealth God has freely given. Francis, however, though his poverty was able to grow rich in spiritual wealth.²⁸ His poverty was a sign of his radical faith, willing to throw aside material comforts to conform more closely to the life of Christ. In this way, he was completely dependent on God. Though not all Christians are called to Francis' extremes to live in absolute poverty, they should be generous, and willing to use their material wealth cheerfully and without compulsion for the furthering of God's divine will.

²⁵ Clissold, 12.

²⁶ Lawrence Cunningham, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁸ Bonaventure, 680.

Care for the poor and the sick

Not only did he set himself to being poor, he gave devotedly to the poor. Celano writes that Francis would grieve over those who were poorer than him, from a feeling of sincere compassion.²⁹ Ever since his early years, he felt a compassion for those less fortunate, and gave alms to the beggars liberally. One time, he found another brother accusing a poor person of being rich, claiming that he was merely posing as a beggar. Francis commanded that brother to strip naked and to kiss that poor man's feet, asking for forgiveness.³⁰

He also cared for the sick. Though he was terrified of their disease, he visited the lepers and cared for them. His heart reached out to the poor and the rejected of society, to bring to them the love of Christ. His was the heart of a true minister, full of compassion. In his imitation of Christ, he sought to care for those his Savior cared for. He did not merely revel in the ecstasy of the contemplative; his love — given by God — also drove him to care for the needs of people around him.

Preaching to the nations

Francis was a missionary as well. He preached throughout the countryside, telling the simple folk about the Gospel. He sent some of his brethren to France, Germany, and Spain, where many of them met their martyrdom. Francis himself sought martyrdom, to be linked inextricably with the Passion of Christ by the sacrifice of his own life. He sought to bring the message of Christ to the Muslims, and even made his way to Syria to preach to the Sultan.

And when Francis preached, he did not do it with an acerb tongue. He preached without the bitter gall of many prophets. Instead, he let his lifestyle and spirituality speak for themselves, and

²⁹ Celano, "First Life," 292.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

allowed the utter goodness of his heart to pour forth. He lived what he preached, and therefore did not need to rely on oratorical skills or psychological manipulation to share what was in his spirit, the Spirit of God. He imitated Jesus: what he preached, he had already practiced. His life was a witness to his relationship with Christ.

In his life, Francis embraced both the contemplative and the active. Without the contemplative, his action would be empty, shallow. He would have nothing to give but himself. Without the active, he would have a superficial love affair at best. Instead, he was able to give the love of Christ through a knowledge of Scripture and a relationship of intimacy. And, his relationship with God pressed him to make radical decisions, offering his life to God as a spiritual act of worship. Francis' life is a vivid model and a welcome challenge to the spiritual lives of today's Christians. St. Francis of Assisi combined the intimacy of the contemplative and ministry of the active together in spiritual tandem, leading to an honest and devoted imitation of Jesus Christ.

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