

Module 210: Francis of Assisi

The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano; Trans. by David Burr. This is a recent translation, "available for educational use." Selected and Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“This crucified servant of the crucified Lord.”

Module Introduction

Francis is one of the most well-known and well-loved figures of the medieval church. He was an Italian soldier from a wealthy background before he heard the call of Jesus to devote himself to the spiritual life. None of the existing monastic orders seemed to fit his style of spirituality, so he founded his own brotherhood. Their life together was marked by absolute poverty, allowing themselves no possessions at all, preaching, begging, hymn singing, and helping others.

At first the authorities were suspicious: a similar movement, the Waldenses had rejected the Mass, prayers for the dead, and capital punishment, and had allowed women to preach and ordinary people to baptize. In the end, though, the pope recognized the Franciscans, who of course remain a great monastic order down to the present day.

Thomas of Celano was one of the first generation of Franciscans, and he wrote the biography on the instructions the Pope. As he finished it in 1230, only a few years after Francis’ death, it is the earliest source we have for St Francis, though he later added to it with incidents remembered by other monks.

Francis was strolling one day near the old church of St. Damian, which was nearly destroyed and abandoned by all. The spirit led him to enter the church and pray. Devoutly lying prostrate before the crucifix, stirred by unusual visitations, he found he was different than when he entered. While he was in this affected state, something absolutely unheard-of occurred. The crucifix moved its lips and began to speak. “Francis,” it said, calling him by name, “go and repair my house, which, as you see, is completely

destroyed." Francis was stupefied and nearly deranged by this speech. He prepared to obey, surrendering himself completely to the project. But since he considered the change in him to be beyond description, it is best for us to be silent about what he himself could not describe. From then on compassion for the crucified one was imprinted in his holy soul and, one may devoutly suspect, the stigmata of the holy passion were deeply imprinted in his heart, though not yet in his flesh.

[Francis' father disapproved and brought him before the bishop to make him obey.] When he had been led before the bishop, Francis neither delayed nor explained himself, but simply stripped off his clothes and threw them aside, giving them back to his father. He did not even keep his trousers, but stood there in front of everyone completely naked. The bishop, sensing his intention and admiring his constancy, rose and wrapped his arms around Francis, covering him with his own robe. He saw clearly that Francis was divinely inspired and that his action contained a mystery. Thus he became Francis' helper, cherishing and comforting him.

This holy man, having changed his attire and repaired the aforesaid church, went to another place near Assisi and began to rebuild a certain dilapidated and nearly ruined church, ceasing only when the task was finished. Then he went to still another place called the Portiuncula, the site of a church dedicated to the blessed virgin, the mother of God. This church, built long ago, was now deserted and cared for by no one. When the holy man of God saw how destroyed the church was, he was moved with pity and began to spend a great deal of time there, for he burned with devotion toward the mother of all good. It was in the third year of his conversion that he began to repair this church. At that time he wore a sort of hermit's attire, a leather belt around his waist and a staff in his hands, and he went about wearing shoes. One day, however, when the gospel story of Christ sending his disciples to preach was read in the church, the

holy man of God was present and more or less understood the words of the gospel. After mass he humbly asked the priest to explain the gospel to him. He heard that Christ's disciples were supposed to possess neither gold, nor silver, nor money; were to have neither bread nor staff; were to have neither shoes nor two tunics; but were to preach the kingdom of God and penance.

When the priest had finished, Francis, rejoicing in the spirit of God, said, "This is what I want! This is what I'm looking for! This is what I want to do from the bottom of my heart!"

Thus the holy father, overflowing with joy, hurried to fulfill those healing words, nor did he suffer any delay in carrying out what he had heard. He took off his shoes, tossed away his staff, was satisfied with a single tunic, and exchanged his leather belt for a cord. He made himself a tunic that looked like the cross so that he could beat off the temptations of the devil. It was rough in order to crucify the vices and sins of the flesh. It was poor and mean so that the world would not covet it. With the greatest diligence and reverence he tried to do everything else that he had heard, for he was not a deaf hearer of the gospel but, laudably committing all that he had heard to memory, he diligently attempted to fulfill them to the letter.

[Others begin to follow Francis and live like him.] Seeing that the Lord God daily increased their number, Francis wrote simply and in a few words a form of life and rule for himself and his brothers both present and to come. It mainly used the words of the gospel, for the perfection of which alone he yearned. Nevertheless, he did insert a few other things necessary for the pursuit of a holy life. He came to Rome with all his brothers, hoping that Pope Innocent III would confirm what he had written. At that time the venerable bishop of Assisi, Guido, who honored Francis and the brothers and prized them with a special love, also happened to be in Rome. When he saw Francis and his

brothers there and did not know the cause, he was very upset, since he feared they were planning to desert their native city, in which God was now doing great things through his servants. He was pleased to have such men in his diocese and relied greatly on their life and manners. Having heard the cause of their visit and understood their plan, he was relieved and promised to give them advice and aid.

At that time the church was led by Innocent III, who was famous, very learned, gifted in speech, and burning with zeal for whatever would further the cause of the Christian faith. When he had discovered what these men of God wanted and thought the matter over, he assented to their request and did what had to be done. Exhorting and admonishing them about many things, he blessed Saint Francis and his brothers, saying to them, "Go with the Lord, brothers, and preach penance to all as the Lord will inspire you. Then, when the Lord increases you in number and in grace, return joyously to me. At that time I will concede more to you and commit greater things to you more confidently."

The virtue of patience so enfolded them that they sought to be where they could suffer bodily persecution rather than where, their sanctity being known and praised, they might be exalted by the world. Many times when they were insulted, ridiculed, stripped naked, beaten, bound or imprisoned, they trusted in no one's patronage but rather bore all so manfully that only praise and thanksgiving echoed in their mouths.

Scarcely or never did they cease their prayers and praise of God. Instead, continually discussing what they had done, they thanked God for what they had done well and shed tears over what they had neglected to do or done carelessly. They thought themselves abandoned by God if in their worship they did not find themselves constantly visited by

their accustomed fervor. When they wanted to throw themselves into prayer, they developed certain techniques to keep from being snatched off by sleep. Some held themselves up by suspended ropes in order to make sure their worship would not be disturbed by sleep creeping up on them. Others encased their bodies in iron instruments. Still others encased themselves in wooden girdles. If, as usually occurs, their sobriety was disturbed by abundance of food or drink, or if they exceeded the limits of necessity by even a little because they were tired from a journey, they harshly tormented themselves by abstinence for many days. They tried to repress the promptings of the flesh by such great mortification that they did not hesitate to strip naked in the coldest ice or inundate their bodies with a flow of blood by piercing themselves all over with thorns.

Meanwhile, at a time when many were joining the brothers, most blessed father Francis was passing through the valley of Spoleto. He came to a certain place near Bevagna, in which a great many birds of various types had congregated, including doves, crows and some others commonly called daws. When he saw them Francis, that most blessed servant of God, being a man of great fervor and very sympathetic toward the lower, irrational creatures, quickly left his companions on the road and ran over to them. When he got there, he saw that they were waiting expectantly and saluted them. Surprised that the birds had not flown away as they normally do, he was filled with joy and humbly begged them to listen to the word of God. Among the things he told them, he said the following:

“My brothers the birds, you should love your creator deeply and praise him always. He has given you feathers to wear, wings to fly with, and what ever else you need. He has made you noble among his creatures and given you a dwelling in the pure air. You neither sow nor reap, yet he nevertheless protects and governs you without any anxiety on your part.”

Two years before Francis gave his soul back to heaven, while he was staying in a hermitage called "Alverna" after the place where it was located, he saw in a vision from God a man with six wings like a seraph, standing above him with hands extended and feet together, affixed to a cross. Two wings were raised over his head, two were extended in flight, and two hid his entire body.

When the blessed servant of God saw these things he was filled with wonder, but he did not know what the vision meant. He rejoiced greatly in the benign and gracious expression with which he saw himself regarded by the seraph, whose beauty was indescribable; yet he was alarmed by the fact that the seraph was affixed to the cross and was suffering terribly. Thus Francis rose, one might say, sad and happy, joy and grief alternating in him. He wondered anxiously what this vision could mean, and his soul was uneasy as it searched for understanding. And as his understanding sought in vain for an explanation and his heart was filled with perplexity at the great novelty of this vision, the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet, just as he had seen them slightly earlier in the crucified man above him.

His hands and feet seemed to be pierced by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing in the palms of his hands and on the upper sides of his feet, the points appearing on the other side. The marks were round on the palm of each hand but elongated on the other side, and small pieces of flesh jutting out from the rest took on the appearance of the nail-ends, bent and driven back. In the same way the marks of nails were impressed on his feet and projected beyond the rest of the flesh. Moreover, his right side had a large wound as if it had been pierced with a spear, and it often bled so that his tunic and trousers were soaked with his sacred blood.

Alas, how few were worthy of viewing the wound in the side

of this crucified servant of the crucified Lord. How fortunate was Elias, who was worthy of seeing it while the holy man lived, but no less fortunate was Rufinus, who touched the wound with his own hands. For once, when the aforesaid brother Rufinus put his hand on the holy man's chest in order to rub him, his hand fell to his right side, as often occurs, and he happened to touch that precious wound. The holy man of God suffered great anguish from that touch and, pushing the hand away, he cried out to the Lord to forgive him. He carefully hid the wound from outsiders and cautiously concealed it from those near him, so that even his most devoted followers and those who were constantly at his side knew nothing of it for a long time.

Discussion Starters:

What happened to Francis in St Damian's church? What difference did it make to him?

How did Francis respond to his father's attempts to make him obey? What do you think Francis was trying to say in this spectacle?

"He heard that Christ's disciples were supposed to possess neither gold, nor silver, nor money." Do you think this was an instruction just to Christ's disciples on one occasion, a command for all Christians, an ideal for the most spiritual people of all ages, or what?

"They sought to be where they could suffer bodily persecution." Was Francis right, do you think, that such sufferings are good for the soul? Was he right in deliberately seeking them out? What does the New Testament say about such punishing one's own body to gain perfection?

The devotion of these first Franciscans certainly sounds painful. Does it go too far to be spiritually healthy? How do we know where to draw the line between saintly devotion and dangerous fanaticism?

We finish with two stories, of Francis preaching to the birds and of his stigmata? What do you make of these stories? What do they have to tell us?

What do you think Francis's message would be to the church today?

Bible Verses

Matthew 10:1-23, 34-39

Deuteronomy 5:16, 21:18-21

James 1:2-4

Matthew 5:29-30

2 Corinthians 11:21-28

1 Peter 4:12-19