

## **Francis: A Very Modern Ecologist. December 2006**

This is an exploration of the ecological Francis. Francis would not have known what the word meant and he certainly would not be familiar with the science as we need to be today. He had, however, deep spiritual insights and was in touch with the creation and Earth, so much so that, he became almost a shaman for the church. The process was certainly one of personal development after a decision to follow Christ. Today Francis has been made the saint of ecology, as he always was. This article is offered as an attempt to understand the instincts he explored.

### **The Experimenter**

Francis lived in a Medieval world when many ideas were not based on science, nor had knowledge developed as far as it has today. He was however original, different from Augustine, Benedict and Dominic, in that his followers focussed, not on the doctrine or rule or even the brotherhood and sisterhood, but on Francis himself. He himself was and is the meaning and ideals. Although literate but uncertain about scholarship, his movement attracted and still attracts brilliant minds. Francis was an experimenter in spirituality, one who experimented on himself. He evolved his own spiritual journey through personal feedback and learned and taught the messages that the experience of living in Christ gave him. He began in prosperity and then in poverty and grew spiritually through penance to a joy of living. This he found in all creation. He tested himself as a hermit then served the sick and the lepers. He walked with God and found Him in nature. This was done through intuition. Reflecting on our modern science situation we can use this inspiration. It leads us to a simple lifestyle that is sustaining and sustainable. He was unique in his approach to living the Christian life based on emulating Christ. No other public religious leader has taken this way of poverty and love until Gandhi and perhaps Tolstoy. However such sanctity is a feature of our times where Francis's teaching has now come of age in the lives of many contemporary scientists and religious. Francis was not exclusive, but inclusive to all God's creation as we must be.

### **Simplicity**

We cannot live successfully in our modern world without choosing a modicum of simplicity or comfortable austerity. Simplicity is complicated and needs learning about. It can be expensive, as Gandhi's followers found, in that we choose fair trade, organic foods and locally made and grown goods, that do not exploit poverty. Choosing simplicity needs energy and courage, standing up to consumerism in the system and defining what we mean by this lifestyle. Simplicity prompts humanity to live sustainably and fairly within the basic needs of the planet as all other life does. It means meeting no more than our basic material needs and from this discipline developing our and humanity's cultural and spiritual potential. Simplicity develops a spiritual excellence, an inner freedom and it enhances intellectual opportunities of knowing and understanding creation and God. It guarantees a sharing with our fellows and the rest of creation. Fundamental to this is knowledge, education and research. These are characteristics of all saintly communities, saints and wisdom. If we live simply we can all live joyously and well, minimising our ecological footprint. Learning and spirituality will deepen through feedback. Francis pursued this discipline, deepening his spirituality as his inner search progressed and his outer relationship with creation intensified.

### **Ecocentric not Anthropocentric**

There are conflicting ethics to be found in the approach of the churches and the religious. The two approaches are the anthropocentric; human centred, and ecocentric; Earth centred. Francis probably never thought in this way at the beginning. His ambition was material and his hopes were romantic. When he began to follow his mentor Christ he found that the Earth was ecocentric in its sustainability. He found his wholeness through a divine who must be ecocentric, not anthropocentric. No Servant Leader can be anthropocentric. Humanity and Franciscans must be inclusive in sharing the planet with the rest of creation. The church was anthropocentric, a crusading, warring expoliter of nature, a complete contrast to Francis's simplicity.

### **Following Christ's Example**

Francis followed Christ. He did not know what his chosen lifestyle would achieve. He had tried war and being a romantic troubadour, yet suddenly he was overtaken by a call to simplicity and rebuilding God's church. He first took this as a lonely task to rebuild the small ruined church of San Damiano. Later he realised that the rebuilding was to be in the hearts of people. His calling to follow Christ and to be a Servant Leader attracted a following who saw in his poverty a new way of being, a new way of loving and a new inclusive spirituality that was animistic in that it included all creation. The church of Francis's time must have felt threatened for was exclusive, one of rigid dogma. A tendency it still has. A church that sought violently to suppress opposition, questioning and heresy. One that crusaded against the infidels and destroyed the Cathars a peaceable group not unlike the Franciscans. What were the powerful hierarchy to do with this small man of poverty who tried, openly and experimentally, to live the simple way of Christ. Francis presented a problem in that he also represented the spiritual truths of animism and paganism, found in the still extant folk religion as well as in church festivals. Nature under the Catholic Church had been deprived of its significance. The spiritual insights from creation or science had been neglected and oppressed. The church secluded itself into theological juggling, monastic libraries, huge churches and cathedrals with a loss of understanding nature that was the life of the nature living peasant. Ignorance and oppression were features of the time. There was no glory in the world only in an unseen God to whom only the priesthood had exclusive access and which the peasantry feared and the rich paid for indulgence and salvation. Francis was different in that he followed the promises and teachings of Christ, including the still radical admonition to love one's neighbour as oneself. Francis was inclusive beyond the church's teaching, he imitated Christ and met with sinners and kissed lepers.

### **Developing Foolishness.**

Francis was born in 1181 in Assisi. His father was a wealthy merchant. Francis revelled in his father's wealth. He gambled, drank and wanted to be knight in the perpetual wars between rival cities. He was captured and imprisoned and considered becoming a monk and eventually stripped of even his clothes, and perhaps his mind, he sought consolation in the forests and caves. He considered following the well ordered religious life in the buildings of the churches and monasteries, he even re-built some structures, but he felt called to new ways of being, of closeness to nature, poverty, simplicity and humility. Losing his despair he chose a foolish way to follow God. One of compassion and powerlessness. He lived with the poor and dressed the lepers wounds. He founded a new kind of church, not one built on buildings, but one built in the hearts of the people and the poor. It was an inclusive church of the untidy village, the hectic market square where contemplation meets action and celebration, includes work and concern for the poor, where sinners find grace. Francis found that the gospel is and must be rooted in the people and creation. Francis did not know whether his personal revolution would be accepted or successful. Where he worshipped was below the open skies, revelling the joy of nature, inventing the Christmas crib and the Easter stations of the cross and the lessons of love they demonstrated. With no mandate apart from his inner calling he shook the foundations of, even threatened, the institutional church and brought a new dimension to Christianity. Thousands, to his surprise followed him. His simplicity, madness and compassion converted many hearts as they found in him the Servant Leader they could follow. The difference he founded was a new depth of spirituality instead of practised devotion. His spirituality had a vitality and a joy that was attractive. His spirituality was personal in its development, but public in its outcomes and above all close to nature.

### **Approval: Staying with the Church**

In 1209 Francis obtained papal approval for this foolish new way. This was confirmed in 1223 and so was born the First Order of Franciscans. When he died in 1226 there were over 20,000 Franciscans all over Europe. A new paradigm had begun and new way of spiritual personality was being explored. I am not sure that many in the Church knew what to do with Francis. There must have been some

opposition and we know that there was concern over the heretical groups springing up in the South of France. Perhaps under another regime Francis's radical left wing views would have resulted in execution and persecution. Certainly later Franciscan leaders such as Bonaventura, suppressed and censored some of the more radical early documents. The church urgently needed, as it does today, renewal and rethinking. The powerful pope Innocent III had already, perhaps arrogantly, changed his title from Vicar of Peter to Vicar of Christ. The Fourth Crusade had failed in its objective of taking Jerusalem. It was from this powerful and busy man that Francis sought approval of his simple rule. Legends surround this first meeting, such as the Pope telling Francis to go and live in a pig sty, which he obeyed, or the Pope dreaming of a ragged figure holding up the church. These stories do show how Francis, wanting reform, still saw that he must remain within the papal blessing. The powerful church hierarchy must have seen something different in this ragged band and so gave his permission for them to follow this new rule. Francis may have been ordained Deacon during this time and he and his followers were tonsured as a sign of the church's support for something that was remarkably different. It was itinerant, lived by work and alms, (a practice banned for clergy) and dressed as the poor and, insanely, also preached to birds who seemed to listen.

### **Enough**

What attracted these followers to him. A personal Christianity that encountered God in Christ. A freshness that turns to the gospel directly, not the accretions of centuries of dogma but into the immediacy of the needs of the poor. A sensitivity that embraced the leper, or the bishop, or the Muslim Sultan Kamil with equal affection. A strict poverty of enough and no more. A joy in his apparent madness and a recognition of the vitality of creation, even to animism and the compassion of paganism and even other faiths. He peacefully crossed the battle lines of the crusaders and was welcomed by the Muslims who recognised his divine insanity. He converted no followers of Mohammed but this crossing of the lines must have been a risky protest against the insanity of the Crusades and war. What today we would call non-violence. He welcomed joy, beauty and with affection and had a personal charm that won over not only people, but his brothers and sisters of creation among whom were the wolf, the birds and the cricket. He identified with the poor, with the crucified sacrificial Christ and with all of nature. He vitally saw himself as part of God's creation, not separate from it, a very modern ecological insight. He lived close to the Earth on which he walked and slept. He was a person possessed with a desire to fulfil the calling that God had placed on him; rebuild my church. He followed his heart, the truth he found, the love he inspired and the mercy he gave and the souls he touched. Max Scheler called him a person of sympathy as a universal emotion. Dante called him the Sun of Assisi and his life was centred round his Christ, the crib, the cross and the Eucharist. He seemed, like Christ, to have come from another world yet, like his saviour he was fundamentally in it and of it. That is the lesson we must take from his actions if we are to follow his idea of life's or creation's complete interdependence, now endorsed by the science of evolution and DNA. We now know that are brothers and sisters with the rest of creation who live according to the sustaining principle of enough.

### **Compassion and the Feminine.**

Clare, his great love, was his spiritual companion in all this. She may well have had an earlier deep spiritual life with her sisters, rather like the Beguine Sisterhood. His brothers he advised to be mothers to each other showed strongly the femininity that flowed out of him. He called himself the Poverello; the poor little man or Fratello; little brother. Everything in nature he called either brother or sister, thus recognising his equality within the whole of God's creation. His relationship with creation eventually caused the Pope John-Paul II to name him the saint of ecology. He was a friend to all things, the sun, the moon, the stars, the beauty of the flowers, water and the garden.

Brother earth, fire and air he greeted and asked them to serve God and strangely they responded to his love for them. He found himself a son of God and in that creation relationship seems to have become aware of the feedback principles of that very modern and controversial hypothesis, Gaia. This instinct was both ancient and modern, Christian and pagan. He was unique, yet ordinary, he chose poverty yet he found a kind of riches fame and followers. He was human yet he touched the divine, he was small and simple yet he grew into the hearts of generations who follow him. He was a shaman for creation and a Servant Leader for all mankind whose vision is still fresh and relevant. His short, tattered much mended robe, speaks more to me than anything else in Assisi. He found the feminine within his own personality, as such he was a modern metro-sexual man.

### **One of God's Creatures**

For Francis this was a way of being with the Earth. An ecocentric relationship with the Earth.. One that has now been proved by science through the genetic code that defines all life as well as the principles of Darwin as well as the Gaia Hypothesis. For him there would be no violence for all life was connected and had purpose and meaning. There is a soul in all creation. He only took from the Earth what he needed, and his simple needs, or deep ecological footprints, were very small. He felt his relationship with the whole of creation and saw an equality in all life. He preached to the birds, not as an alternative to humans, but because they were God's creatures as he was and talked to the wolf as a brother changing the animal's nature. Did he see within all creation a soul which would respond to his compassion and humanity. He was uniquely human yet he touched the divine and it showed and his new way of being was followed. He must, according to his tattered robe, have been small and physically insignificant, yet his humility, paradoxically, meant that he bestrode subsequent generations. Today we understand that we are part of God's creation, that we do have a direct lineage and linkage to creation's complex evolution. Despite Francis's humility, his personality, which people found easy to follow, must have been so attractive and as incorruptible as Christ. Such courageous pacifism is dangerous to those with power, again good reasons why his radicalism could so easily have been persecuted by the church and he could have ended at the stake. Francis set up a new set of values in ecology which today we are just beginning to appreciate.

### **The Servant Leader as a spiritual calling.**

Francis chose to become a 'Servant Leader' and many have followed his inspiration, some to martyrdom, to which he may have aspired when itinerant to Dalmatia. While not wanting to make a hierarchy of spirituality, finding the Servant Leadership within ourselves is an important stage of our spirituality. All religious are called to serve their family, neighbour, community, nation, the creation that sustains our planet, the Earth and God, who as our Father loves his creation. So profound is that love that he gave His only son to be our saviour. That is the ultimate sacrifice in 'Servant Leadership'. Francis followed as the servant of Christ. There is also a servant followership where we follow and serve. The following and the service are two side of the same coin. Francis followed Christ and in that found a calling to lead his brothers and his church into new ways. Today his ways of ecological sustainability are found to be essential.

### **Non-Violence.**

Francis crossed the no-mans land between the warring Crusaders and the Saracens. We can gather that he did not wholly approve of war and the Crusades for he sought the love of God in all. He did not convert one single Muslim, although he tried inexplicably 'without preaching' and was accommodated for two years in the court of Sultan Malik -al-Kamil. The Sultan thought him mad, but ordered that this was the madness of the divine and that no harm should come to him. Perhaps Francis did not want to convert the Saracens, perhaps he saw in their ethics and morals and in their recognition of Christ as a prophet the compassion that is part of all the great religions. Perhaps initially he sought martyrdom, but they recognised in him the energy, compassion and peace of what we call non-violence. He was a man of peace and peace was his message to Islam not the cruel uncompassionate wars of the Crusades. Other later Franciscan missionaries may have been less tactful as they were executed.

## **Leadership**

All human groups need leadership. In fact it would appear to be part of the natural evolved process of animal life in at least its early nourishment and later as part of the herd or pack. Few are real loners. The Servant Leader is also led, by values, an inspiration or a meaning that in its greatest form looks to a new way of being which is more than a material gain. This allows those who choose to follow to achieve their potential. Servant leadership is much more than vision or high values. It is a seeking of the potential of God in humanity and humanity through God. Francis made things happen that he probably thought were impossible. His immediate followers must have been on the constant threshold of surprise as new visions were shown, drawn and challenged from their inmost souls. Servant Leaders, like Francis, offer themselves to God, in integrity, gratitude, humility and courage. The Servant Leader, as Francis was, surrenders himself to his followers, as Christ did, even to their failure. The result is an accepted powerlessness that transcends all material authority and whose inspiration is eternal. A non-violent compassion. Francis was God's trustee of His/his inspiration and it attracted and attracts followers who choose to follow these ideals. His trusteeship was materially small, but spiritually vast.. Spiritual leadership begins and ends with 'not my will but thine' and Francis walked a path that we could all follow. To follow the modern green path begins with what we call our ecological footprint. We are allowed so much, enough and no more and our challenge must be to discover what that personal enoughness means as a basis for our cultural and spiritual development. For Francis it was extreme simplicity, as his life and patched robe show. For us today it must reflect the sustainable limits the planet asks of our lifestyle. .

## **Modern Followers.**

For humanity Servant Leadership must begin to live within the economic constraints of the Earth or Gaia. For if we take too much for ourselves then there will not be enough for others, including future generations. Today we need to contact the extent of our commitment of material resources and at the same time converge equitably to the enoughness that meets our needs and the needs of our neighbours. Our neighbours are the other life forms and creatures of creation, to whom we are indebted, the trees, the insects and the fauna that fulfils our Earth. Living simply is part of the interest we repay to Mother Earth herself which Francis continually acknowledged. Since Christ and Francis there have been many who have taken up the challenge of Servant Leadership. Tolstoy, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Bonhoeffer, the Franciscan, Maximillian Kolbe, Chicos Mendes and Dorothy Stang (d.14.2.05) These we recognise through their martyrdom. There are thousands of others who unsung have taken up the divine challenge to lead and serve God's purpose. The scientists now tell us that we must live more equitably so that others may simply live. We need Servant Leaders and the sciences who spread that message. All creation may benefit, for if we have a purpose, it is that we were made to serve God's Earth. Science now teaches us that the Earth was not made for humanity but humanity for the Earth. Francis felt this intuitively and found this in scripture.

## **Christ's Compassion.**

Compassion is the vital element in all the great religions. Without it, and the religious do at times lose sight of its importance, religion becomes no more than a power base or a vehicle of oppression, violence and fundamentalism. Francis showed constant compassion as he served the poor, the sick and kissed the leper, preached to the birds, calmed the wolf and asked the cricket to sing for him. He identified with the poor by choosing poverty. Compassion is nothing more or less than practical love. Francis was always practical and the poor, nature and his fellows responded.

## **Francis and Evolution.**

If the stories of all the great religious luminaries have any meaning it is that they are part of the evolution of creation and the spiritual evolution of humanity. The same continuing process. The Axial Age from about 800- 200BCE flourished and in that period the basis of all the great religions were founded from Buddha to Zoroaster, Socrates to Confucius including the great Jewish prophets. It is as if the world found religion and its essential compassion. These were the basis for Christ's practical ethics and Mohammed's morality. . During this period a change came over humanity as it progressed

along the pilgrimage of compassion, that essential part of all these great religious discoveries. These spiritualities changed humanity to new ways of being. Each established itself and each has run or is running a course through history which would have been different without it. All came at a time when the new ideas of goodness for the evolving culture were needed. They seem to culminate in Christ. Francis came at a time when the church needed a radical shot in the arm, when the institution had become institutionalised. Initially his impact was extensive and his followers whether, friars, Poor Clares or Third Order Tertiaries were rapidly numbered in their thousands. Then like all movements the initial charism of Francis became corrupted. The new way of being became part of the institution. This is inevitable with the inspiration of new visions, yet there remains in all these visionaries a contemporary relevance that continues to inspire and lead as the original re-emerges.

Yet the deep spirituality of the Servant Leader still touches the originality of that first sacrifice and still converts those who seek to find the truths of religion, spirituality and the evolving culture of humanity. These are the spiritual feedback loops which progress the human situation as part of the magnificence of evolution. An evolution of species, spirituality, human culture and the planet. Uniquely humanity is placed to understand and develop these insights which are changing the world. Francis's insights are one foundation of that change. A change to simplicity not greed, a change to partnership not competition and to compassion not cruelty, perhaps from exclusiveness of religion to the inclusivity of all creation. The Earth is at the beginning of a New Age, one of sustainability. Moving on from the ages of agriculture and industrialisation and still seeking the promise of that Axial age when love or compassion began to be part of the human construct. Francis's voice is still being heard loudly, his evolving vision, once partly lost is strengthening yet again at the beginnings of this New Age. His ecocentric vision of the whole of creation is one of the models for a successful New Age. Without it the possibility of human self extinction exists. Francis has still much to teach us, not least that visions of hope can still be found in the freedom of choosing to follow the Little Man of Assisi who chose to follow the example of Jesus Christ who re-iterated the visions of Israel's prophets as part of an evolving continuum of good.

### **Francis and Freedom.**

There can be no such thing as freedom without responsibility. That responsibility recognises the need for limits, restraint and discipline. Understanding by science or intuition is a guarantee of freedom. Some freedoms are negatives, 'thou shalt not' others are more positive, 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. These rules are made, not to prescribe what shall or will not be done but to define the physical limits within which the less material culture and spirituality of humanity can grow and goodness flourish. Francis recognised this in his personal development and exploration. As his own experiment he sought spirituality that could not develop without the simplicity and the poverty he embraced. He saw that in order to have an awareness of our place in the scheme of things, a role in serving the Earth for which humanity was made, not the Earth for mankind. He saw that to choose poverty meant ending the chase for material possessions which can so easily dominate and damage our aspirations. His pilgrimage, and that of his companions, focussed on the importance of being, rather than having.

### **Francis and Science**

Francis knew nothing of ecology, evolution or DNA, but he did recognise, through intuition, the interrelationship of creation. He knew that we had to accept that in order to fulfil our potential. He called all manifestations of creation brother, sister and would certainly have understood the responsibility we all owe to our Mother Earth. Einstein said that science is about what is, religion is about what should be. From his intuition Francis saw what should be, he recognised the vital importance of living simply, what today we would call minimising our ecological footprint. In himself he tried to set an example of poverty, simplicity and joy in living. His joy touched many hearts and showed that the way of Christ and the institution of the church was based on compassion and goodness. This is a necessary human and ecocentric development where we have to choose the path of partnership with creation not competition. Humanity's need to seek knowledge, research, grow in

culture and find in the whole of creation a spirituality that inspires our civilisation. That Franciscan style of living, if humanity is to survive, must serve the needs of the Earth not the needs of humanity. That is the God challenge of Francis in today's world where we understand much more, what we call science. Christ came to share as we too must learn to share. Francis exemplifies that challenge.

### **Sacrifice, Suffering and Death.**

Humanity cannot avoid sacrifice, suffering or death. Francis following Christ accepted the painful stigmata which he called a blessing as well as risking persecution. All human beings receive and accept suffering as part of their sacrifice. Compassion to those who suffer is part of our recognition of our human and living brotherhood and sisterhood. It extends far beyond the human condition to all life. We cannot avoid suffering, sacrifice and death, but we can live with it and we can mitigate it. Francis showed courage in that he accepted his painful condition. He is the example for Christians. Sacrifice is part of the ecological sharing that is found in all life. Humanity during the Axial age came of age through empathising with suffering and its acceptance and that became part of the Buddhist tradition. It is part of the life experience that Francis sought and found in following Christ. Initially there was an innocence about his calling that grew into the suffering that led to the stigmata. That is the nature of all human life and of the deepening awareness we have of God's and our own evolving creation. Buddha, Gandhi and others trod the same path through compassion and sacrifice to human fulfilment and death.

### **Conclusion**

Francis as a spiritual servant leader was himself the experiment and experimenter. In this he followed a long tradition of religious Servant Leaders from Buddha to Gandhi. He tested and struggled with himself against the examples of Christ. He was radical enough to be threatened by the church he served as Christ was. As such he chose those issues which enabled his own spiritual development. We only know of Christ's mature years, not of those years when his development would have been deeply personal, for spirituality is about a personal development that is public in its outcomes which makes community. However that spirituality as it deepens can find a relationship with the divine and creation and the importance of non-violence. We can find in these inspirations anticipation of what later became scientific truths. Francis was of his time and also threatened the establishment of his age, but he was also, as all great saints are, equally of all time and as such he continues to inspire and renew us in what is now the beginning of a New Age, a unique ecological challenge in secular and religious human experience. Francis is being newly discovered in this New Age.

### **Notes**

**Armstrong, Karen.** Buddha, Phoenix, 2000. pp10-11 Axial age.

**Boff, Leonardo** Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor. Orbis ( Maryknoll) 1997 pp 203-220 St Francis

**Cunningham, Lawrence S.** Francis of Assisi, Eerdmans, 2004. Scholarly modern approach.

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