

A Meditation on the three Marks of our Profession
as members of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis

Humility, love and joy

“Humility, love and joy are the three notes which mark the lives of each of us as Tertiaries. When these characteristics are evident throughout the Order its work will be fruitful. Without them all that it attempts will be in vain.”

HUMILITY



Francis declares: “from now on I shall say ‘Our Father...’”

“But when his father saw that he could not dissuade him from the way he had chosen, he was determined by all means to get his money back. He brought his son before the bishop of the city, so that he might remove all his possessions into his hands and give back everything he had. In his genuine love for poverty, Francis was more than ready to comply and he willingly appeared before the bishop. There, without hesitation, he immediately took off his clothes and gave them back to his father. He even took off his trousers in his fervour and enthusiasm and stood there naked before them all. Then he said to his father “Until now I called you my father, but from now on I can say without reserve, ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ He is all my wealth and I place all my confidence in him.” When the bishop heard this, he was amazed at his passionate fervour. He jumped to his feet and took Francis into his embrace, covering him in the cloak he was wearing, like the good man that he was.

Then he told his servants to bring some clothes for him and they gave him an old tunic which belonged to one of the bishop’s farmhands. Francis took it gratefully and drew a cross on it with his

own hand with a piece of chalk, making it a worthy garment for a man who was crucified and a beggar. And so the servant of the most high King was left stripped of all that belonged to him, that he might follow the Lord whom he loved, who hung naked on the cross.” (Thomas of Celano, First Life 14; Bonaventure, Major Life II.4)

Humility which is the close companion of poverty, is the love of being small. Francis used to say “O Lady Holy Poverty, the Lord preserve thee with thy sister holy humility!” Both are part of the foundations of the Order. (Rule I c9 II c 6,12) He encourages all friars to love humility: “I beseech, in the charity which is God, all my brothers, preachers, prayers or labourers, both clerics and laics, that they study to humble themselves in all things and that they glory not, nor rejoice, nor inwardly exalt themselves on account of good words and works, nor indeed for any good which God may sometimes say or do and operate in them or by them.” (Rule I c17)

From Celano’s First Life we learn that Francis warned against preachers who tried to shine as orators because they indulged “more in verbosity, instead of speaking from heartfelt emotion. He also told scholarly friars that learning may render them “indocile and stubborn in the humble practices of religious life.” However, he admonished “superiors” even more frequently, saying: “only those should hold the office of superiors who prefer nothing to the salvation of their souls and do not seek the favour of their subjects but their welfare” and that it is “a dangerous thing to rule but a profitable thing to be ruled.” (n104) After all, the Order was of the Friars Minor, committed to serve lepers and those who showed ambition to occupy places of honour, Francis no longer considered as Fratres Mionores. (Celano, Second Life n 143)

Originally, Francis had longed to become the “King of Youth” on the way to becoming a member of the nobility of his home town until, after his conversion, he revelled in the mockery of the locals who saw him as a kind of laughing-stock. The Three Companions tell how Francis appointed one of his brothers as his guardian “whom he obeyed humbly and submissively in order thus to avoid all occasions of pride”. (n 57)

His passion for humility was demonstrated by the reverence and respect for other people. He saw himself as the greatest sinner and the most unworthy. For example, on his return from the Holy Land he instructed Brother Leonard to ride whilst he himself walked even though he was very tired.

Brother Pacificus had a dream in which he saw a special sea empty in heaven which awaited Francis. It had been occupied by Lucifer. On hearing of the dream Francis protested “If Christ had shown such great mercy to a criminal, however wicked he may be, he would be tenfold more perfect than I.” (Celano II n123)

We know that Francis desperately tried to conceal the stigmata from public view and also from his bothers. (Celano I n95) Anything good about his character came from God and belonged to God, he would say. “Do not praise me as if I were secure. He is not worthy to be praised whose end is uncertain.” (Celano II n133) He thought, acted and lived as if nobody else existed except he and God. Such lowliness is a distinctive mark of our profession.

LOVE



Francis encounters a leper (Bonaventure, Major Life I.5)

One day as he (Francis) was riding on the plain below Assisi, he met a leper. The encounter was completely without warning and Francis felt sick at the sight of him. The he remembered his resolve to be perfect and the need to overcome himself first, if he wanted to be a Knight of Christ. He immediately dismounted, running to kiss the poor man. The leper stretched out his hand, hoping to get something. Francis placed some money in it and kissed it. Then he mounted his horse, looking this way and that about the plain with a clear view in all directions, but there was no sign of the leper.

He then galloped homeward and, taking a large amount of money, rode to the leper hospital, kissed the hands of the patients distributing the money among them. He speaks of this in his testament: "When I was in sin it seemed to me very bitter to see lepers, and the Lord himself led me amongst them and I showed mercy to them. And, when I left them, that which had seemed to

me bitter was changed for me into sweetness of body and soul.” (Ubertino di Casale Rotilus, Archiv III. 127)

Love is such a meagre and hopelessly inadequate word when we consider the length and breadth, height and depth of all that it includes. Yet, after humility, it is the second of the three marks of our profession as members of the Third Order. In this unidentified illustration of Francis embracing the leper, what strikes us first is the look of utter astonishment on the face of one of the most abject and despised characters of medieval times. The face could equally be that of a woman or a man. Francis is seen at the moment just before his lips touch the cheek of the outcast whose gaunt features display an almost deathly aspect. The fingers on the leper’s hand appear to be mere stumps as is often seen in photographs of those with this terrible disease. Another striking feature is the mark of the nail which has pierced the hand. The lover is about to be embraced by the beloved. On the distant horizon, the presence of three crosses confirms the identity of the outcast. Tradition suggests that, following the encounter, Francis truly believed the leper to have been Christ himself. And we know that he always called the lepers “Brother Christians”.

Brother Ramon expresses so well (as always) the heart of the matter: “Francis entered into union with Christ in love. In such a life, he suffered in and with Christ, took to himself the pains and sorrows of his brothers and sisters, and then confronted the powers of darkness at their source. This is what the Gospel meant to Francis, and that is what it must mean for us.” (Br Ramon FS p 186)

JOY



Francis receives the Stigmata of the Lord

“Two years before Francis gave his soul back to heaven, while he was living in the hermitage called La Verna, after the place on which he stood, he saw in a vision of God a man standing above him, like a seraph with six wings, his hands extended and his feet joined together and fixed to a cross. Two of the wings were extended above his head, two were extended as if for flight, and two were wrapped around the whole body. When the blessed servant of the Most High saw these things, he was filled with the greatest wonder, but he could not understand what this vision should mean. Still, he was filled with happiness and rejoiced very greatly because of the kind and gracious look with which he saw himself regarded by the seraph whose beauty was beyond estimation; but the fact that the seraph was fixed to a cross and the sharpness of his suffering filled Francis with

fear. And so he arose sorrowful and joyful, and joy and grief were in him alternately. Solicitously he thought about what this vision could mean, and his soul was in great anxiety to find its meaning. And while he was thus unable to come to any understanding of it and the strangeness of the vision perplexed his heart, the marks of the nails began to appear in his hands and feet, just as he had seen them a little before in the crucified man above him. Furthermore, his right side was though it had been pierced by a lance and had a wound in it that frequently bled so that his tunic and trousers were very often covered with his blood.” (Thomas of Celano, First Life 94-95.)

Francis’ mother, about whom very little is known, was called Giovana and is often referred to as Pica. She originated from the Provence region of France, rich in musical tradition which, together with the troubadours and jongleurs, gave the young Frenchman a joyous start as “the first in frolic, in mirth and song” (Celano, First Life n2.) during his captivity in Perugia with other young bloods of Assisi, he alone managed to achieve a cheerful disposition. He described himself to some thugs thus: “I am a minstrel of the great King; what is it to you?” so straight away they threw him into a ditch. Eventually, climbing out, he wandered over the countryside praising God joyfully.

Throughout his life, even in the dark and painful periods, he maintained an uplifted spirit. Only once, close to death, did this joy threaten to leave him but a voice suggested that he should rejoice, confident that he would shortly be in heaven. The following morning he composed the Canticle of the Sun which we all know and love so much. He passed into the next life singing.

Cheerfulness is an essential characteristic of the Religious (which includes Tertiaries). Devils are unable to harm a servant of Christ who is filled with joy. Francis encouraged his followers to be joyful both in their exterior appearance and conduct as well. Once, when his eyes were particularly painful, he asked a lute player to compose a song and perform it secretly. But the musician was reluctant lest he be thought of as insensitive. Understanding the man’s predicament Francis then prayed and was granted angelic music in his spirit the following night.

“Joyous minstrels of the Lord” is how Francis described his followers. The cure for sadness was to engage in prayer until the joyfulness returns. This remains true today. If you begin to feel down, the best remedy is to visit people under your care from the very young to the very old. This remedy always works for me, almost instantaneously.

Because Francis and his followers “possessed nothing, loved nothing neither did they fear to lose anything” (Legend of the Three Companions n39.) This is the joy of poverty. As troubadours and minstrels were the “sunshine of the knighthood” (Felder p 241) so joyfulness was the delight of the heralds of the great King.

Peter Dunbar TSSF