

THIRD ORDER STUDY WEEK - ALNMOUTH 2008

Francis - A Fool for Christ's Sake

The purpose of my paper and of further reflections at Alnmouth is to look at Francis' life against the background in Christian Spirituality of - the Holy Fool. I will attempt to outline how this tradition originated in early Christianity and indeed can be found in the folklore of many cultures and religions. In my reading I have been greatly helped by John Seward's - 'Perfect Fools' now sadly out of print and also Julien Green's - 'God's Fool'.

The third Note of our Order is - Joy - being ready to bring joy into the lives of others and it has been my experience of our three Orders that the note of Joy has never been lacking. Joy of course is not the same as humour but they do share some of the same characteristics and the story of fools, clowns and jokers throughout history has shown the significant part that they have played in the lives of people and indeed in the story of institutions and communities.

The deepest foundation for the foolishness of Christians lies of course in the foolishness of God. It is God himself who unmask the wisdom of the world i.e. makes himself known through what is foolish. Christians necessarily have to do with a God who is not afraid of mockery and even exposes himself to laughter. The God who is recognised in the crucified Christ is therefore one who is laughed at, scorned and mocked. Because God in Christ was himself among those who have been laughed at, Christians will always take the side of those who themselves are laughed at. Therefore for Christian's knowledge of God and foolishness, discipleship of Christ and folly are all indissolubly linked.

Throughout the History of Christian Spirituality there has always been a keen link or connection between foolishness and faith. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition - 'the fool for Christ's sake' is to be found among the category of saints along with the 'martyr', 'virgin' and 'confessor'. The Holy Fool is commonly encountered in the folklore of many cultures and religions. In the Jewish/Christian tradition the earliest form of folly was of course found in the symbolic action of the prophets - the strange and sometimes outrageous form of behaviour that was intended to shock people into perceiving the truth of their situation - Isaiah walks barefoot and naked for three years as a warning to the people against placing their trust in an alliance with Egypt (Is.20/2ff). In the New Testament the most famous reference to the fool is in 1Cor 4/10 - 'For Christ's sake we are fools but you are wise in union with Christ ... we are the scum of the earth'.

'If you want to know the truth' - runs a Modern Greek proverb - 'ask a child or a fool'. Our Lord himself (Matt 11/25) says that the Father has hidden the mysteries of the Kingdom from the wise and revealed them to babes. Francis followed in the steps of many others before him who in the first Millennium took our Lord at his word and received from God the rare gift and charism of holy folly. In that early tradition in both the Eastern and Western church men

and women came forth who exhibited similar gifts and attributes to those later found in Francis. In both the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches the holy fool was regarded as one called by God to obey the words of Paul - 'If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise' (1Cor 3/18). Folly for Christ's sake is indeed an integral part of Orthodox Spirituality and 'fools' are amongst the most beloved saints of the East. It would be interesting to pursue an enquiry into whether the role of the comedian in the modern secular age fulfils a similar function.

The Monastic Period in both the East and the West produced a number of individuals who established that the monastic life and holy folly were useful allies - although not all monks were holy fools and vice-versa. In Ireland the holy fools could be identified in the *geilt* or Irish wild man whose abode could often be a rocky cave by the seashore or a cabin in a forest. In secular terms the role of the fool was often that of the medieval jester and such jesters were often felt to be in possession of spiritual powers, prophecy and healing.

It can be seen therefore that Francis was not the first or the last to adopt the life-style and pattern of the holy fool. However it was his life, which was to set the pattern of what we now term - Franciscan Spirituality and its emphasis on humility, love and joy. His joy in the Lord and radiant spirituality powerfully continue to communicate themselves to many through to our present century. In Francis' life there is much that resonates to 'a fool for Christ's sake' and we certainly find in him all of the elements of holy folly. Like the *geilts* of Ireland he was converted as the result of a battle and the illness which followed his imprisonment. Like the holy fools of Russia (*saloj* and *yurodivye*) he stripped himself naked and disowned his father in the presence of the Bishop of Assisi. He identified himself with beggars, lepers and the lowest of human kind. He was a wanderer and pilgrim and joyfully endured humiliation and contempt. Again like many of the fools of East and West his wildness gave him a rapport with all living creatures - he preached to the birds, converted a wolf and sang the wonders and praises of all creation - he was God' troubadour and minstrel.

Like the prophets of old there were many occasions when Francis behaved in an apparently foolish and eccentric way in order the better to illustrate some truth of the gospel - In an account of the Pentecost Chapter of 1222 during a debate about which form of rule to adopt Francis spoke against the whole notion of adopting other rules - 'The Lord told me that he wanted me to be a new fool and he did not want to lead us by any other way' - (*Speculum perfectionis* lxviii p. 196ff).

Francis was also an exponent of what might be called - 'the gospel of good humour'. In early Franciscan literature there is the constant use of the terminology of joy. The joy of Francis was a rich, full-blooded and enthusiastic mirth in the Lord Jesus and Francis above all wanted his disciples to be the Lord's Merry Men - his *joculatores* or jokers.

I hope to be able to develop this theme of Francis as God's joker and holy fool by looking more closely at other accounts of his life and also to examine ways

in which the holy fool continues to be role rich in potential for Christian spirituality and which as mentioned earlier in this paper can be an ingredient at work in secular society leading to betterment of humankind.

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