

## **Francis - a Saint for all People**

*"The American Library of Congress knows of more biographies of Francis than of any other human being"* quotes Richard Rohr in one of his talks.

The question could be asked of why is St. Francis such a popular saint with people of all shades of spirituality and none. Although Francis was obviously a Catholic, there is something about his life that has a universal appeal to Christians of all denominations as well as other faiths.

John Michael Talbot OSF write in the Foreword of "Francis – a call to conversion" :

*Francis was a stalwart follower of Christ, yet he is esteemed as a holy man by those of many other religions. He was an obedient son of the Roman Catholic Church, yet he is held up high as a mirror of gospel perfection by those of all Christian persuasions"*<sup>1</sup>

As I myself have my spiritual roots in the evangelical end of the Anglican Church, in this paper, I would like to look at some aspects of Francis' life and spirituality that speak especially to Evangelicals. I chose this subject because of the surprise that some people in the church have shown when I have told them that I am a Tertiary. There is often an expectation that Tertiaries are more likely to be Catholic in their spirituality. This is not a problem within the Third Order and churchmanship is not an issue.

### **Conversion**

Evangelicals emphasise the importance of having a "conversion" experience or being "born again". This to them shows the seriousness of a person's intentions of following Christ and turning away from their old life.

Francis' experience of conversion was classical. We first find him living the life of a typical rich young man of his time and he is described as fun loving and gregarious, trying to follow the troubadour romantic tradition. Then on his way to fight the army of Apulia, God spoke to him, like Saul on the road to Damascus. God told him to literally "turn around" and return home.

This is a conversion that would be very familiar to Evangelicals. Someone living a worldly life, possibly a spoilt young man doing his own thing, when he hears God telling him to "repent" or "turn around" and go another way.

Then Francis' dramatic leaving of his father and his old life by stripping off his clothes and leaving behind the riches that could hold him back. Reminiscent of the old chorus *"I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back, no turning back"*. To the Evangelical this would be a serious conversion and the stripping of the clothes a symbol of new birth. Francis' donning of his rough habit was reminiscent of the early Church's baptisms when the candidate

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold, Duane & Fry, George "Francis A call to conversion", Triangle, 1988

would go under the water and then be clothed in a white garment, signifying their new life in Christ.

## **Scripture**

Francis was more a fundamentalist Christian in his regard for Scripture than any Southern Baptist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century! When reading the gospel in Mathew 10 about Jesus Commissioning of his Disciples, Francis took it so literally that he threw away his staff, his sandals and his belt.

In the Anglican Church today there are divisions over the reading and interpretation of Scripture and one wonders where Francis would have stood on some of these matters.

Francis' literal obedience to Scripture caused him to go overboard but it still attracted others to his way of life, and resulted in some of his fellow noblemen joining him in a life of poverty and service.

We can see parallels today in the growth of many Evangelical churches and the success of Alpha courses. Many want a more simple and prescriptive faith, which is literal and not woolly at the edges! In the world today with so few absolutes, Francis' simple literal understanding of the Bible is attractive to many, although most Christians are more discerning in the passages they choose to take literally!

It is interesting that most members of the Third Order do not fall into this category of literal interpreters of Scripture.

## **Cross**

The cross and the death of Jesus are central to Evangelical theology. Salvation is so closely linked with conversion and evangelism. "*The old Rugged Cross*" and "*When I survey the wondrous cross*" are both hymns loved by Evangelicals and I am sure Francis, if they had been written at an earlier time. Evangelicals always have an empty cross as the symbol of their faith rather than a crucifix, believing that the once for all sacrifice has been made and Christ has been raised from the dead.

Francis would spend hours gazing at the cross and in his extremism wanted to experience the actual pain that Jesus went through. So much so, that as we know, he received the marks of the stigmata at Mount Verna.

This episode of Francis' life would seem very strange to Evangelicals, and most other Christians, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the phenomenon of stigmata is known today, perhaps it has more to say about mediaeval piety than something for us to emulate.

But St. Paul at the end of his letter to Galatians says "*for I bear on my body the scars that show I belong to Jesus*". He, of course, was speaking of the

marks from his various beating and imprisonment but the same word “stigmata” is used for scars.

Evangelicals are not normally “closet Christians” and want to be known for what they are, sometimes to the embarrassment of others, because they want to show that they are different and belong to Jesus. They believe that the Spirit of God lives in them so their words and their way of life are the stigmata that reveals that to others.

## **Joy**

Evangelicals are often accused of being “happy clappy” and extrovert in their worship. Francis would sing and dance for joy with his brothers as they travelled around Italy. In Myers Briggs personality terms, Francis was a “sensing” person, someone who needed to experience God in seeing, in hearing, in touching, in smelling. This love of life brought great joy to him and to others.

Sometimes Evangelicals can be thought of as insensitive or callous if they continue to say “Praise the Lord” regardless of what is happening in life. But Francis rejoiced when people shut him out of their houses, threw garbage at him forcing him and his brothers to sleep out in the cold and wet.

Real joy, of course, is not superficial, not putting on a good face but it is grounded in the knowledge of God’s unconditional love. Francis had that and Evangelicals are encouraged to have that confidence, assurance and certainty of being children of God and knowing that nothing can separate them from God’s love.

## **Conclusion**

I have focussed in this paper on just four aspects of Franciscan spirituality, which particularly are relevant to Evangelicals, but of course there is so much more that is attractive to others. For example simplicity to the Anabaptist tradition, his love of creation to environmentalists and his serving of others to social activists etc. One only needs to visit the Anglican Franciscan page on Facebook to see the variety of people who follow Christ after the example of Francis.

*Sandy White*