

TSSF Study & Prayer Franciscan 2013: Lifelong Formation
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Following Francis in Prayer: Conversations and Reflections
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Initial thoughts for this paper began in late October 2012 when Jason Robert SSF was giving a guided tour of Alnmouth Friary to a group I had brought from my home congregation for a weekend retreat. In response to a question about the prayers of St Francis, Br Jason spoke about the prayers left to us by Francis and what they mean to him. The questioner, as you might guess, thought she knew at least one of Francis' prayers (the frequently mis-attributed 'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...') and wondered if there were others. It occurred to me as I listened to Jason, how interesting and helpful it might be to hear from other Brothers too on this topic; then perhaps to widen the discussion and get First and Third Order members talking about and using Franciscan prayers together.

As a first step, I asked the Brothers at Alnmouth Friary if they would be willing to have a conversation with me about the prayers of Francis at which I would take notes to form the basis of this paper; and they agreed, for which I'm most grateful. So one afternoon in August, I sat and (mostly) listened while Brothers Desmond Alban, Jason Robert, John, Reginald and Thomas Anthony discussed various aspects of Francis' prayers. What follows in plain type is a slightly-reorganised account of that conversation (not a verbatim record except where quotation marks are used); *anything which appears in Italics is my own comment or reflection added later.*

We adore you, most holy, Lord Jesus Christ
here and in all your churches throughout the world,
and we bless you, because by your holy Cross,
you have redeemed the world.

The conversation began with me thanking the Brothers for having given me music for this prayer which I love and which I sing in my head, sometimes using it (as others use short prayers such as the 'Jesus Prayer') almost as a kind of mantra, repeating it over and over again. We talked about using 'We adore you...' not only on entering a church, as Francis tells us in his Testament¹ that he did, but also it was suggested, on seeing a church from a train *and presumably from a car too, although perhaps only if one is a passenger!* I learned that the musical setting used in Alnmouth and other Friaries today was written by an Ian Robertson in the 1970s, and that the prayer, which used to be said at the beginning of the day, was moved to Midday Prayer so that no words would be spoken aloud (*the Angelus being in silence apart from the bell*) before Morning Prayer begins with 'O Lord, open our lips'.

The thought that 'We adore you...' expresses in just four lines much that was at the heart of Francis' faith led on to the comment that, if we are looking for simple prayers to guide us, two short phrases which capture the essence of Francis' spirituality at the beginning and towards the

end of his life might be “Lord, what do you want me to do?”² and “My God and my all!”³ *Although these two brief prayers cannot be directly attributed to Francis in his own writings, they express important features of his life of prayer. Requests for God’s will to be revealed to him continued almost to the end of Francis’ life (eg. shortly before receiving the stigmata, he ‘prostrated himself with his heart as much as his body in prayer’ asking for God’s will to be revealed in opening the Gospel book⁴); and the adoration of God is a pervading theme throughout his prayers. Though perhaps not Francis’ own words, these phrases convey two very Franciscan desires – to know God’s will and to worship God - in plain, modern language; ideal perhaps for us today, when we are seeking God’s will or simply to bring ourselves into God’s presence, to use through repetition to lead us into meditative, wordless prayer.*

As the discussion ranged through different examples of Francis’ prayers, I noted down phrases about being able to “trace right through his life” and the prayers being “like a spiritual journey”. The Canticle of Brother Sun was mentioned in this context, having been written in three stages: the first and longest part composed after receiving the stigmata; the second prompted by a dispute between the civil and religious authorities in Assisi; and the third being written near the time of Francis’ death. There were also two interesting suggestions: that the Canticle possibly remains incomplete since it makes no mention of Christ; and that the fact that it was written in Italian might have influenced Dante, a great admirer, to write in that language.

The Canticle also illustrates the comment that Francis was forever “setting everything in the context of praise and prayer”. *Begun when he had received the stigmata and was enduring immense physical pain and distress, and ending (if not actually completed) as he approached his death, nevertheless the Canticle is a great hymn of praise. This outpouring of worship and adoration from the depths of suffering is picked up in the sentiment “My God and my all!” and shows how Francis himself lived and experienced the true joy he enjoined on his followers⁵.*

Fondness was expressed for The Office of the Passion, a liturgy which reflects Francis’ great devotion to the Virgin Mary. I learned that Francis was the first to describe Mary as ‘Spouse of the Holy Spirit’ as he does in an antiphon where he asks Mary along with other members of the company of heaven to pray for us.

Holy Virgin Mary....
..... Mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ,
Spouse of the Holy Spirit,
pray for us with Saint Michael the Archangel,
all the powers of heaven
and all the saints,
at the side of your most holy beloved Son,
our Lord and teacher.....⁶

Another “fabulous hymn of praise” is to be found in the Earlier Rule. Here, in one stanza we even find the thought that we ourselves are not worthy to pray – “we’re never going to do it well enough” – but that we can ask Christ and the Holy Spirit to pray on our behalf:

Because all of us, wretches and sinners,
are not worthy to pronounce Your name,
we humbly ask
our Lord Jesus Christ,
Your beloved Son,
in Whom You were well pleased,
together with the Holy Spirit,
the Paraclete,
to give You thanks,
for everything
as it pleases You and Him,
Who always satisfies you in everything,
through Whom You have done so much for us.
Alleluia!⁷

We talked of two very different influences on Francis’ devotional life. Firstly, the chivalry which held sway as “the youth culture of his day” was probably behind a title such as Lady Poverty and the address at the beginning of A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary:

Hail, O Lady,
Holy Queen⁸

In addition to the knight or troubadour’s duty to honour and protect his Lady, chivalric ideas also included the personification of virtues as in Francis’ A Salutation of the Virtues, addressed to the virtues considered to have been possessed by Mary:

Hail, Queen Wisdom!
May the Lord protect You,
with your Sister, holy pure Simplicity!
Lady holy Poverty,
may the Lord protect you,
with Your Sister, holy Humility!
Lady holy Charity,
may the Lord protect You,
with Your Sister, holy Obedience...⁹

*Indeed, in the introduction to A Salutation of the Virtues, the editors say ‘Francis greets each virtue in a fashion typical of a mediaeval troubadour’.*¹⁰

Secondly, there is the likelihood that Francis’ exposure to Muslim piety a little later in life was a factor in the introduction of the Angelus bell, calling people to prayer at prescribed times of day as does the muezzin in Islamic countries. *I’m personally reasonably convinced of this, considering that Francis may well have been impressed, as many Christians are today, by the disciplined practice of their faith by those who take their ‘islam’, that is ‘submission’ to God, seriously. It is*

*also possible that the Muslim principle of 99 names for God¹¹ influenced Francis' prayers (the best example is *The Praises of God*¹²) which address God with a list of attributes. Whether or not this is the case, *The Praises of God* forms an interesting counterbalance to *A Salutation of the Virtues*.*

The theme of humility was spoken about, and lines from the Letter to the Entire Order were recalled which appear in a passage used on Christmas Eve at Glasshampton:

.....O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!.....
Humble yourselves
that you may be exalted by Him!
Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
that He Who gives Himself totally to you
may receive you totally!¹³

Though not strictly a prayer, it has a depth of feeling which draws the hearer in, a depth of feeling which is also to be found in the Absorbait which Brothers described as a "highlight", "almost Ignatian in its totality"; that praying it "stretches" us with its sense of "longing".

May the power of your love, Lord Christ,
fiery and sweet,
so absorb our hearts
as to withdraw them from all that is under heaven;
grant that we may be ready
to die for love of your love,
as you died for love of our love. Amen.

I love it too, although it is of course a prayer 'after Francis of Assisi'¹⁴ rather than a prayer taken directly from his writings. Notwithstanding, there was the suggestion that this prayer, the Canticle of Brother Sun and 'We adore you...' are much to be preferred for the simplicity of their language whilst other prayers of Francis are "too flowery".

There are of course several other prayers left to us by Francis which are not mentioned here, but that was where our conversation ended for the time being. At this stage, two lessons I would draw from St Francis for my own life of prayer and ongoing formation are his strong emphasis on praise and adoration of God, and the continual return to ask 'Lord, what do you want me to do?'

The Study & Prayer week provided an opportunity to pick up the conversation again with a wider group of Tertiaries; but mostly this happened informally since we spent the time in the session earmarked for this topic praying together rather than talking about prayer. This paper is offered now as simply a discussion-starter, a collection of ideas for reflection, rather than anything more definitive, in the hope it might be useful to those who wish to follow Francis in prayer.

NB. Franciscan sources are taken from: Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellman, O.F.M.Conv., William J. Short, O.F.M. (Eds) *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, New City Press (New York, London, Manila) Vol.I *The Saint*, 1999, Vol.II *The Founder* 2000, Vol.III *The Prophet* 2001

¹ Test 4-5 (Vol.1 pp.124-5)

² He prayed with all his heart that the eternal and true God guide his way and teach him to do His will. 1C 3.6 (Vol.I p.187)

³ Although indeed 'my God and my all' might be said to encapsulate the culmination of Francis' faith, the story which most closely fits this prayer, recorded in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, comes at the beginning of Francis' ministry. It concerns Bernard of Quintavalle, who feigns sleep in order to observe Francis and 'examine his holiness'. Observing that Francis spends the entire night in prayer, repeating fervently the simple words 'My God', Bernard is so affected that he becomes the first follower of St Francis. LF1 2 (Vol.III p.567)

⁴ 2C 2.92-3 (Vol.I p.262)

⁵ Cf. Chapter 8 of *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* for the account of Francis explaining to Brother Leo 'those things that are perfect joy'. LFI 8 (Vol.III pp.579-581)

⁶ OfP Part 1, Antiphon at Compline (Vol.I p.141)

⁷ ER 23.5 (Vol.I pp.82-3)

⁸ SalBVM 1 (Vol.I p.163)

⁹ SalV 1-3 (Vol.I p.164)

¹⁰ Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellman, O.F.M.Conv., William J. Short, O.F.M. (Eds) *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, New City Press (New York, London, Manila) Vol.I p.164

¹¹ <http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/99names.htm> accessed 22/09/13

¹² PrsG (Vol.I p.109)

¹³ LtOrd 26 (Vol.I p.118)

¹⁴ The Daily Office SSF p.199