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Francis of Assisi

If we were to take the stories about Francis at face value, he must have lived in a world constantly shot through with supernatural intrusions. When Francis preached, the birds of the air settled around him and fishes poked their heads out of the water to listen to him. When Francis prayed at night, angelic choirs could be heard providing appropriate background music. Francis frequently had visions. Christ appeared and spoke to him. He was shown scenes of things that were to happen in the future. In other words, Francis was a man who experienced God's presence in a very explicit and miraculous way.

A typical example of this might be what happened to Francis and his early companions while they were traveling in the valley of Spoleto. Having just founded his little band of mendicant friars, Francis could not make up his mind whether they should restrict themselves to prayer and contemplation or dedicate their lives to the active apostolate. It was, indeed, a very important decision. Should the future Franciscans spend their time praising God in total withdrawal from the world as true contemplatives? Or should they devote themselves to preaching and spiritual guidance in an effort to reform the church? In his *Life of St. Francis*, St. Bonaventure narrates that the brethren argued about it for a long time:

But Francis, true servant of Christ, did not trust in his own efforts or those of his brethren. With urgent prayer he implored God to let him know His Divine will concerning the matter. Then he was illumined by a divinely

revealed oracle. He understood that he had been called by God to this purpose, that he might win back for Christ the souls that the Devil was trying to carry off. Therefore he decided to live rather for all men than for himself.¹

What happened when Francis was "illuminated by a divinely revealed oracle"? In the context of the other miracles and wonders, does it not suggest that Christ appeared to him in an aura of light and told him: "Francis, I want you to win back for me the souls the devil is trying to carry off"? Because we have never seen Christ appear to us in this fashion (nor, for that matter, enjoyed the sight of fishes poking their heads out of the water to listen to our words), we are inclined to switch off. And rightly so. For this type of thing does not happen to us. And, even if such things did really happen to St. Francis, it does not help us in the least. But by putting Francis' experiences on the shelf of medieval miracles, we may well be doing him, and ourselves, an injustice.

Revelations

There can be no doubt about it: The real events of Francis' life are encrusted with fanciful medieval elaboration. Yet, if we compare independent sources, we can reconstruct the historical events to a high degree of reliability. We have from the 13th century itself the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, the two biographies by Thomas of Celano (1229 and 1247) and the *Life* written by St. Bonaventure (1263). We can add to this the *Mirror of Perfection*, which was compiled in 1318. As various traditions have been somewhat independently preserved in these books, we can detect accretions and uncover historical kernels by comparative study. This also helps us to understand how contemporaries of St. Francis interpreted his experience of the Divine.

Let us revert to the incident quoted above, to the

“divinely revealed oracle” that made Francis take up preaching. In the *Flowers of St. Francis* we read a slightly different version of what took place in those fateful days. Francis, we read, was in great uncertainty as to what God expected him to do with the newly founded order. Should the members be wholly intent on prayer or should they preach? “Greatly he desired to know the will of God concerning these things.” The account then continues to narrate that Francis did not want to trust his own judgment or even his own prayers in the matter. So he decided to seek advice.

He called Friar Maffeo and sent him with the same request to Sister Clare and Friar Silvester. To both of them he sent this message: “Please, pray devoutly to God that He may be pleased to reveal to me which is the more excellent way: whether to give myself up to preaching or entirely to prayer.” After some time Friar Maffeo returned from his mission, having separately taken advice from the two persons indicated. Both of them had come to the same conclusion. It is interesting to note how the reply was conveyed to St. Francis.

When Friar Maffeo returned, Francis treated him as a messenger from God. He washed his feet and set a meal before him. Then he took him aside for some distance into the forest, knelt down before him, bent his arms in the form of a cross, and asked of him, “What is it that my Lord Jesus Christ commands?” Friar Maffeo replied: “This is the answer that Friar Silvester and Sister Clare received from God: You should go forth to preach throughout the world. Christ has not chosen you for yourself alone, but for the salvation of others.” When Francis had heard these words, he understood they expressed the will of Christ. He rose up and said with great fervor, “Let us then go forth in God’s name.”²

Here we have an interpretation of what St. Bonaventure meant with his “divinely revealed oracle.” There was no apparition of Christ, no super-

natural voice, not even an unusual ecstasy. Francis relied on the prayer and the insights of two holy persons. When their advice was communicated to him, in words similar to those spoken about Paul: "I have chosen him to serve me, to make my name known to Gentiles and kings" (Acts 9:15), Francis recognized in this a communication to him from Christ. The external guidance received and the testimony of his heart combined to reveal a manifestation of God's will.

With our 20th century everything-or-nothing approach, we might now draw the conclusion that nothing happened at all. Apparently we accept only full-scale miracles or the dull monotony of everyday life! Here is where we miss the point and where the Middle Ages can teach us something. Christ may not have appeared to Francis in his visible human form and radiant with light, but does this mean that Francis did not have a *real* experience of Christ in the event? Is it not likely that Francis, who was so open and sensitive to God's presence, perceived in a flash of insight that it was Christ himself who communicated his will in this way? Seen in this light, Bonaventure's statement is quite accurate: Francis *was* illumined by a divinely revealed oracle.

The Role of Scripture

Having gained this better understanding of St. Francis' spiritual experiences, we can examine with more confidence some other turning points in his life. If we do this, we will discover that Sacred Scripture played an important role in them.

What should St. Francis' followers be called? By what name should they become known? The *Mirror of Perfection* states that it was revealed to Blessed Francis that the order should be called the Order of Friars Minor. How was it revealed to him? From the available data, we can reconstruct the event as an insight result-

ing from prayerful reflection on the gospels. When Francis started his search for an appropriate name, he prayed about it. He wondered what name Christ himself would want to impose. He turned to the gospels for guidance. He was struck by two passages which were apparently unrelated: "There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom," and "Whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me" (Lk 12:32,JB; Mt 25:40). Francis was struck by the fact that Christ addressed his apostles as "a *little* flock," that he used the term "the least of my brethren." It fitted exactly the image Francis had of what his followers should be; namely, small, little, the least, "minor." In this process of reflecting on these gospel texts and communicating with Christ about it, the words of the gospel were perceived by Francis as expressing a specific message of Christ to him. He experienced them as Christ talking to him directly. And so he could say in all truth: "Christ revealed to me that he wants us to be called the Order of the Friars Minor."³

A similar insight of St. Francis caused a new greeting to be used by his itinerant preachers. He told them to wish peace to everyone they met in words such as "May the Lord grant you peace!" or "Peace be to you!" Since people were not used to such a truly religious salutation, they used to laugh and make jokes about this singular custom. But Francis, who was extremely anxious to follow the Lord's injunctions to the letter, had grasped the importance of Christ's admonition to the apostles, "When you go into a house, say, 'Peace be with you' " (Mt 10:12). He could say, as he was to write in his testament, "The Lord revealed to me that I should say for a greeting: the Lord give you peace." This greeting marked him off as a spiritual messenger, as an apostle of Christ. So whenever a friar became discouraged by the ridicule of people, Francis

could reply confidently: "Let them talk. These people do not perceive the things which are of God."⁴ The remark was, indeed, to the point. What was lacking in them was spiritual perception.

Many of the "revelations" Francis received resulted from a prayerful listening to the word of scripture. Was it not the simple reading aloud of Mark 6:1-11 that set Francis off to a life of apostolic poverty? On that day early in his life when Francis was still groping for guidance regarding his way of life, he happened one day to attend Mass in a small church. The gospel that was read out contained Christ's admonition to his disciples that they should carry no money in their purses, no spare tunic. The text made an indelible impression on Francis. He was filled with unspeakable joy. He said, "This is what I desire, this is what I long for with all my heart!" Immediately after Mass, on leaving the church, he took off his shoes, laid aside his staff, his purse, threw away his mantle and walked away barefoot, possessing just one garment.⁵ Later Francis was to say that this way of life had been communicated to him by a divine revelation.⁶ Francis was aware of the fact that God speaks through scripture.

Being a Doer of the Word

Francis possessed an enormous faith in and respect for Sacred Scripture. Yet when we study his teaching, we do not find great stress on the reading of the inspired writings. He did not prescribe that every friar, or even every community of friars, should have its own copy of the Bible. Never, to my knowledge, did he enjoin the regular meditation of scripture or recommend that some members of the order be appointed for specialized studies in it. No, whenever the question of scripture studies came up, rather than fa-

voring such external practices, Francis always reiterated the same message: Don't waste time in studying scripture. Rather, put in practice what it tells you to do. Be a doer of the Word and not just a hearer.

Francis was expressing by this a lesson he had experienced in his own life. The word of God only became real for him when he had put it into practice. His way of life consisted in nothing else but in taking Jesus' words literally. When he composed his first rule for the order, he did little more than string together quotations of gospel texts.⁷ Even in its later formulation, the rule was for him no more than an effort to execute a program laid down in the gospels. Francis did not think of the gospel as a text in a book (as we unconsciously do), but as something affecting his life. And although he had scripture read out to him every day, he could easily dispense with it. On his deathbed he could say: "No, don't read Scripture to me now. There is no need of it. I carry the words of the Crucified One in my heart and in my bones."⁸

Once, when Francis was living at St. Mary of the Portiuncula, a poor woman came begging for food. It turned out that she was the mother of two of Francis' followers who lived in another community. Francis wanted to give her some money or something to eat, but the Minister General, Father Peter of Catania, told him: "We have nothing in the house that we could give her. The only thing of value we have is the copy of the New Testament from which we read the Lessons at Matins." As books had to be copied by hand in those days, such a volume was certainly a valuable possession. However, Peter would never have expected Francis' reaction when the latter told him: "Then give the copy to her. For it is much better to practice charity, as we are told to do by Scripture, than to keep reading Scripture and not practice it!"⁹ It was doing the deed that mattered, not possessing the word.

Or consider the case of the novice who wanted to

possess a copy of the psalter. We may assume that the young man was filled with the best of intentions: He desired to pray the psalms more often and meditate on them in the course of the day. But Francis was reluctant to give him this permission, feeling that it would undermine the novice's vow of poverty. As they were sitting near the fire, Francis said: "After you have a psalter, you will desire to have a breviary. Then you will sit in your chair, like a great prelate, and say to your brother, bring me my breviary." Then Francis poured ashes on his head, put his hand on it and kept rubbing it around, saying, "I, a breviary! I, a breviary!" When the novice still did not get the point, Francis talked to him in this way: "My dear friend, in the past we had great heroes and warriors, such as Charlemagne, Roland and Oliver, and many other famous knights. They endured great trials and faced bitter hardship in fighting the Moors. Many died a martyr's death. Nowadays some bards go round who try to obtain honor, not by doing what these great men have done, but by singing about them. This may also be your temptation. Once you start reading books and talking about them, you will put your confidence in knowledge and not in virtuous deeds."¹⁰

Francis was to repeat this again and again. At times he said that learning would be the ruin of the order. "A time of hard testing will come. Then books will be useful for nothing. They shall be thrown in corners and cupboards." Francis' biographer adds that Francis was not opposed to the study of scripture itself, but to the tendency of people to think that learning could make up for practice.¹¹ St. Bonaventure records St. Francis' words on another occasion:

"Yes, indeed, it is my will that priests who have been received in the order should devote themselves unto the study of Holy Scripture. But they should always remember to follow the example of Christ who, we read, prayed more than he studied. They may study as

long as they do not lose their zeal for prayer. Nor should they study only that they may know how they ought to speak. Rather they should study with this purpose in mind of becoming doers of the Word, and, after having done it, of setting forth to others what they should do."¹²

This is indeed plain language. It illustrates once more Francis' preoccupation with taking the word seriously.

Breaking Down Our Defenses

If we examine Francis' life in the way I have done above, he proves to be much closer to us than we might have originally thought. Francis' life was not different from ours in that it contained more miraculous happenings or divine manifestations. Francis was an ordinary person like ourselves, seeking God's will in a complicated world and a confused church. That Francis managed to make something of his life, he owed to his sensitivity; to being aware that God was speaking to him through the words of scripture; and to a determination to do the word rather than just hear it.

Could it be that we are too casual about reading the words of scripture or hearing them read out to us? Does the word of God fail to touch us because we lack Francis' sensitivity?

Psychology tells us that our subconscious is liable to build up defenses against things we are afraid of. One subtle defense mechanism against the effectiveness of scripture may be the illusion that what Christ says need not be taken literally. We keep telling ourselves that putting it into practice would be impractical, if not impossible. This was indeed the objection formulated by some cardinals at Pope Innocent III's court, when Francis tried to obtain approval for his rule. "Living in such a way," the cardinals maintained, "is a thing untried and too hard for human strength." We may perhaps be allowed to think that the cardinals,

in voicing this objection, were subconsciously expressing their own reason for not observing the gospel more strictly. The bishop of Sabina deflated the objection by a simple observation: "This poor man is in fact asking us to approve the pattern of Gospel-life. Let us be careful not to make the Gospel of Christ a stumbling-block. For if anyone says that in the observance of Gospel perfection there is contained anything that is untried, or contrary to reason, or impossible to observe, he would clearly seem to contradict Christ himself, the author of the Gospel."¹³

If we sincerely seek to know God's will, he will reveal himself to us through the words of scripture as he did to Francis. If we are determined to be doers rather than just hearers, he will change our lives too.