

**THE GREAT COMMUNICATOR OF ASSISI:
HOW FRANCIS TRANSMITTED
HIS SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS INSIGHTS**

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Francis of Assisi is often praised for the intensity of his spirituality, the depth of his religious insights and his unique blend of fidelity and authenticity, being at once faithful to the Church and to his own conscience. Yet the cleverness and effectiveness of his communication deserves as much attention. By modern communication standards, he could be described as a man who made exemplary use of different media, each converging to deliver a clear, concise and compelling set of messages in a manner that best suited the audiences he carefully targeted to change attitudes and behaviors. This was achieved, not to deceive or manipulate, as often is the case with publicists and advertisers of our age, but to proclaim the Gospel in order to bring people to believe and live freely according to this good news. To understand how he accomplished this, we must go to the very foundations of his message.

Being a Penitent¹ produced in Francis of Assisi a dramatic broadening of horizons and raising of consciousness. This occurred because he approached intellectual, moral

¹ Being a Penitent in thirteenth century Italy created a distinct identity for persons involved. "Francis asked and obtained permission to be accepted at San Damiano as a *conversus*, thus becoming an *oblatus* or *donatus* or *conversus*, an official form of penitent ... Jordan of Giano also affirmed Francis's entrance into the 'life of penance.' He began his chronicle in this way: 'In the year of the Lord 1207, Francis, who was by profession a merchant, with repentant heart touched by the breath of the Holy Spirit, began a life of penance in the habit of the hermit.'" Raffaele Pazzelli, *St. Francis and The Third Order: The Franciscan and Pre-Franciscan Penitential Movement* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982), 87. Hereafter Pazzelli, *Francis*.

and religious conversion with the willingness to find God in all things and all people, and the courage to align his life with his evolving outlook on what the Gospel had to say about human nature. He avoided esoteric theology or apologetic theories and relentlessly sought to make decisions that were concrete and authentic when faced with contradictions and dark spaces between daily life, Church life and the Gospel life.

To begin with, this article examines four courses of action that he chose with regard to the Gospel in relation to the faith of his family, the religion of his community and the church that gave form and expression to these. My observations regarding his religious foundation focus on his decisions concerning priesthood, brotherhood, the role of ecclesial hierarchy and other elements often associated with Franciscan spirituality.

Francis's decision not to become a priest must be viewed from at least two angles. First, he does not appear to have felt a call, at least initially, to life within the hierarchical structures of the church. His first impetus was to personal conversion, then came the formation of brotherhood to deal with those that God had sent, and only later – mostly out of obedience – did the question of forming an institution arise. Second, the life and privilege enjoyed by the clergy was not compatible with his view of penance.

The call to living the Gospel in the footsteps of Jesus Christ was of paramount importance for Francis. Without disparaging the call to priesthood or monastic life in others, he vigorously pursued a life in union with Lady Poverty, the mirror of Christ. Consequently, he understood his call as being “to give witness to the Gospel by having nothing and being nothing, by living on the social and geographical margins of urban Italian society.”² Perhaps, too, having lived a life of privilege and prestige, he feared remaining too close to familiar habits for fear that he might succumb to temptation and fall into less desirable habits that he saw in some church officials. Regardless of the reason or combination of reasons

² Keith Warner, *Franciscan Spirituality* (Loretto, PA: Institute for Contemporary Franciscan Life [St. Francis University], 1997), 8-4. Hereafter, Warner, *Spirituality*.

for Francis's decision not to seek ordination, there is abundant evidence that he fully integrated this decision into his spirituality. In his various writings, in contrast to hundreds of references to the term "brother," we find comparatively few to clergy. Clearly, he did not count himself among the ranks of clergy:

The relative richness of the vocabulary when it is a question of designating the personnel of the Church is striking when the one who is speaking calls himself *simplex et idiota*, that is, a man without intellectual formation.³

There is ample indication to suggest that he was neither simple-minded nor ignorant. While his schooling was not advanced, he was astute in observation, sound in judgment and able in communication. But this self-understanding of *simplex et idiota* suited him by giving him sufficient freedom to operate authentically in fidelity to Christ and his Church without the inevitable constraints of existing structures. Rather, he settled upon simple evangelical brotherhood.

Francis's spirituality is not fully comprehensible without an appreciation of why he put so much emphasis on fraternal life.⁴ Among other things, he saw in his brothers a divine sign about how he was called to live his faith:⁵ "... the Lord gave me some brothers...."⁶ In fact, it appears that the ar-

³ Warner, *Spirituality*.

⁴ In his modest corpus of writing, he used the word "brother" and its derivatives 306 times. Warner, *Spirituality*, 6-4.

⁵ "Faith is knowledge born of religious love.... Catholic tradition has tended to deal with faith as authoritative knowledge contained in doctrines.... Lonergan has moved below the common sense and theoretical realms in which such a faith is usually located to focus on the gift of divine love.... When faith (self-transcendent falling-in-love) expresses itself to a common culture, it transvalues (re-prioritizes) human concerns. When moral conversion (value) is coupled with religious conversion (faith), there is a shift from the human being (person) as the originating and terminal value to the originating value of God (as good) and the terminal value is the universe (as good)." James Sauer, *A Commentary on Lonergan's Method in Theology* (Ottawa: The Lonergan Website, 2001), 133-34.

⁶ Francis of Assisi, *Testament*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 125. Hereafter *FA:ED* followed by volume and page numbers.

rival of these brothers struck Francis, who seemed inclined to a more solitary form of penance, as an unexpected manifestation of his true vocation. Soon brotherhood became his hermeneutical lens and the horizon in which he understood the Gospel and applied its teachings to his own life: "... but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel."⁷ To some degree, Francis's interpretation of Scripture as a call to fraternal living was conditioned by his surroundings. The establishment of Assisi as a city-state breaking away from the feudal system happened before Francis's conversion but its effect was clear. The emerging economic order witnessed tradesmen beginning to gather into guilds.

A sense of the strength found in solidarity was beginning to surface in all aspects of society, no less so for Francis than for Assisi's tradesmen. While he sought to find his true place in a new social order, he intentionally avoided reference to rank in establishing the brotherhood, in contrast to the class system in which he found so much injustice. Among the salvific characteristics of true fraternal living, Francis found the quality of genuine compassion. His was to be a community of equals bonded by a genuine caring for each other: "What a great flame of charity burned in the new disciples of Christ! What great love of devout company flourished in them!"⁸ There is evidence of this affection, among other sources, in his *Rule for Hermitages*: "Let those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be 'the mother' and have two 'sons' or at least one."⁹ Warner suggests that his model was the relationship of Jesus, Mary and the early disciples,¹⁰ "which is slightly different than the prevailing monastic understanding which was based on the first century church of the Apostles."¹¹ We

⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁸ 1C 38, *FA:ED* 1, 217.

⁹ Francis of Assisi, "A Rule for Hermitages," *FA:ED* 1, 61.

¹⁰ Warner points to *regula non bullata* 9:5: "He was poor and a stranger and lived on alms – He, the Blessed Virgin, and His disciples." *ER IX:5, FA:ED* 1, 70.

¹¹ Warner, *Spirituality*, 6-9.

can assume that Francis did not feel called to this *ecclesiae primitivae forma*, with its assured security, but to affirm what he believed to be the true and radical poverty of Jesus. In the process, he appears to have incarnated the relational qualities *expressed* in a passage in Matthew's Gospel: "Everyone who does the will of my Father is my brother, sister and mother"¹² (Matt 12:50).

Further evidence of the centrality of brotherhood in Francis's spirituality and self-understanding can be found in perhaps his most original work, *The Canticle of the Creatures*, written near the end of his life. In it, he identifies all of creation as one large family, in union with the Holy Trinity, the ultimate form and meaning of relationship: "Francis, therefore, understood himself as a brother: a brother to Jesus, a brother to those in his fraternity, and a brother to all Creation."¹³ From this evidence, we may conclude that one of the key foundations of Francis's spirituality was his insight that, at least for him, "spiritual direction" comes not so much from a "master" but from "living out one's calling to be brother and sister."¹⁴

It is quite understandable, therefore, that Francis would want to lead his Gospel life in a fraternal context, and it is not entirely surprising that he deliberately chose to live that life under the authority of the Pope, despite his disappointment with some aspects of church life. Rather than operate negatively with regard to excesses and laxities in the church, he chose to operate positively in fidelity to Christ's Gospel and to the Pope.

Consciously or otherwise, Francis must have wanted to guard his fraternity from the temptation to evolve into a protest movement. He witnessed first hand the devastation caused by unauthorized reform movements. Francis intentionally chose, therefore, to align himself with the Pope, to pledge the obedience of his brotherhood to the Holy See,

¹² It is worth recalling here verse 52 in Francis's *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*: "We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of His Father who is in heaven" (cf. Matt 12:50). 2LrF 52, FA:ED 1, 49.

¹³ Warner, *Spirituality*, 6-11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-14.

and to ask papal permission for his form of life. He knew that the risk of error outside the parameters of the church was significant, as were the consequences of its condemnation. While choosing not to become a priest or a monk, he also decided “to avoid all confusion of his movement with others, such as the Waldensian, with which it could be confused.”¹⁵ To make the distinction clear, Francis devoted part of his *Testament* to a testimony of respect and devotion for priests, despite the fact that he was often disappointed by their attitude and behavior,¹⁶ even those chosen to help form his new brotherhood.¹⁷

Francis knew of the position of Cathars. Among other things, Cathars exhibited a profound distaste for the idea of Eucharistic realism. Knowing this makes it relatively easy to understand why Francis integrated so explicitly the official prescriptions of the Fourth Lateran Council regarding the Eucharist into his own writings. For Francis, submission to the authority of the Pope was not only strategically wise to ensure that he could continue on the path to which he felt called without ecclesial obstructions, but also it was a spiritual imperative. It flowed in part from his devotion to the cross that he must have seen at times as the church itself.

In time, the movement became more an ecclesial institution than the *poverello* had first intended. There is no doubt that he initially intended a lay movement, living without ecclesial privileges. Yet his determination to remain faithful to the Holy See remained steadfast throughout. For Francis, the Church provided the safest guarantee of

¹⁵ Raoul Manselli, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 67. Hereafter Manselli, *Francis*.

¹⁶ “At this time, the clergy, often mediocre, ignorant, even scandalous, was the object of the virulent criticism of all reformers’ movements. Francis speaks of the intellectual and moral situation which was often deficient: ‘even if ... they are sinful,’ Adm XXVI, 1; ‘if they are sinners,’ Ep Fid II, 33; ‘I do not wish to consider sin in them,’ Test, 9; ‘pitiful priests of this world,’ Test 7.” Thaddée Matura, “The Church in the Writings of Francis of Assisi,” trans. Helen M. Eckrich, “L’Eglise dans les écrits de François d’Assise,” *Antonium* LVII (Jan-Dec, 1982). Hereafter Matura, *Church*.

¹⁷ Manselli stated “We can imagine that Guido helped, comforted, and counselled him, but not in a way that would satisfy Francis on a spiritual level.” Manselli, *Francis*, 69.

fidelity to the Gospel and incorporated all of the mysteries of Catholic faith and presented concrete evidence of God operating among his people. In explaining its importance to Francis, Thaddée Matura referred to it as “space of faith and of evangelical conversion, ... place of the presence of the Son of God, ... the criteria of true faith, ... norm of conduct.”¹⁸ The ultimate expression of this reality was the Lord Pope, to whom Francis promised “obedience ... and reverence.”¹⁹ Once again, we find in Francis the remarkable wisdom of someone who was sensitive to the complex demands of social, ecclesial and Gospel life, and yet found a system for bringing harmony to these often-divergent horizons without doing violence to any one. With disarming simplicity, he courageously blazed a trail that others would follow precisely because he was so very authentic. His solution was neither opportunistic nor simplistic; rather it revealed the fullness of life and the abundance promised by the Savior whom he strove so ardently to follow in uncompromising fidelity and love.²⁰

Other decisions taken by Francis are noteworthy as well in that they began to characterize his evangelical movement. These amounted to living the Gospel in communion with Christ poor and crucified, in the love of God, in brotherhood with all humanity and all creation, participating in the life and mission of the Church, in continual conversion, in a life of prayer and as an instrument of peace. In his *Testament*, Francis recounted the basis on which his fraternal life was established. He claimed to have received the command to embrace the Gospel as a virtual rule of life from no less an authority than God himself: “And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.”²¹

¹⁸ Matura, *Church*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Matt. 10:10b).

²¹ *Testament, FA:ED* 1, 125.

Francis's spirituality was unequivocally and unabashedly Christocentric: his peace was Christ's; his joy, the Lord's infinite love for him. But it was the texture of that union with Christ that so appealed to his contemporaries as it does to us today. For Francis, Jesus' humanity was palpable. That made the love of the Father *who so loved the world that he sent his only son* (John 3:16) a matter of personal relationship and affection. That made the gift of his Son's birth into abject poverty such an incomprehensible act of unconditional love that he would marvel at it at Greccio three years before his death. It made the Son's passion and death on the cross an unfathomable act of compassionate concern for the salvation of so undeserving a creature as he thought himself to be. Francis's union with Christ had become so complete as to enable him to find satisfaction only in the poverty and cross of his savior: "I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most High Lord Jesus Christ ... and to persevere in this until the end."²²

It is worth noting here that what marked Francis's spirituality in a searing way was his passionate love of God, granting equal attention to God the Father, creator of all things and source of all good; to the Son, both Lord and brother to the mightiest and the least of all creatures; and to God's Holy Spirit of Love and Truth. His spirituality was, therefore, markedly Trinitarian. In fact, his *Canticle to the Creatures* is evidence of an amazing insight that would transform Francis's worldview. It is at once as soothing as a sonnet and as disturbing as a clap of thunder, urging us to transform our own self-understanding in relation to God and all things created by God: "When Francis referred to *Brother wolf*²³ or *Sister water*,²⁴ he was not just using a clever rhetorical strategy. He meant those titles quite literally. The implications are quite

²² FLCL VI:7, *CA:ED*, 118.

²³ Probably refers to the legend of "how St. Francis tamed the very fierce Wolf of Gubbio," in *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, in which Francis brings a peaceful solution to the practical problem between the frightened residents of the town of Gubbio and the wolf that threatens their safety. *FA:ED* 3, 602.

²⁴ Almost certainly refers to "The Canticle of the Creatures," *FA:ED* 1, 113ff.

extraordinary for one who takes his brotherhood seriously.”²⁵ At the same time, it should be noted that despite all of the care and concern that he exhibited toward the smallest of God’s creatures, Francis’s interest in them stemmed principally from the fact that “they represented moral qualities and teachings, and they also helped lead (him) to a greater understanding and experience of the Father he shared with them.”²⁶

Finally, Francis’s spirituality is founded on the understanding of penance as conversion or *metanoia*.²⁷ It is a process more than an event, a process that is ongoing. To become a penitent for him was to accept that *metanoia* is fundamentally a way of life.²⁸ It is oriented toward God more than it is away from sin. In this regard, Francis’s active participation in the penitential movement reminds us of Lonergan’s insight into the nature of not only religious conversion but intellectual and moral conversion as well.

After his conversion, Francis’s natural inclination seems to have been oriented toward the contemplative life: “He cultivated the contemplative life in his own soul by ... periodic retreats to hermitages.”²⁹ Prayer was so foundational for Francis that he struggled for a time with the question of whether he should pursue a life of prayer exclusively or in combination with apostolic action. He came to understand his vocation to be one of prayer in action. Referring to the return of the early friars from Rome where they had received verbal approval of their fledgling community, Celano noted that, “It was his custom to divide the time given him to merit grace and, as seemed best, to spend some of it to ben-

²⁵ William Cook, *Francis of Assisi: The Way of Poverty and Humility* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008), 53. Hereafter Cook, *Francis*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ Reference to Cajetan Esser, “Love’s Reply” in Pazzelli, *Francis*, 103.

²⁸ Pope John Paul II echoed this view in addressing contemporary secular Franciscans: “Heirs of that great movement of evangelical life which the *poenitentes de Assisio* embraced, learn to live your vocation ... as brothers and sisters of penance with an enlightened sense of conversion and of continuous renewal.” Dedication in Pazzelli, *Francis*.

²⁹ Dacian Bluma, “Franciscan Life of Prayer,” *The Cord* 13 (1963): 52.

The Cord, 59.2 (2009)

efit his neighbors and use the rest in the blessed solitude of contemplation.”³⁰ Celano concluded that Francis’s life was itself a prayer.³¹

Broadly speaking, Francis’s communication is a testament that takes many forms. Here, we explore his use of four media: his way of living, his preaching, his use of drama and his writing, particularly his *Testament* itself.

Evangelical Living

For Francis, authentic communication could no more be detached from how he lived than the act of flying could be detached from the birds to which he preached,³² and it would appear that he understood that very well: “Francis the apostolic man and Francis the mystic were not two sides or phases; they were fused.”³³ So imperative was the need to integrate the form of life he had chosen and the prayer that expressed its value with the content of his apostolic action that he admonished his brothers to preach with their very lives. They were to be not only witnesses but also evidence of the Good News, not only to human beings, but also to all Creation.

His most critical decisions would have less to do with whether or how to preach but how to live in order to preach authentically. Preaching the Gospel would have to mean being the good news to others, much as Jesus had been in his own time as he proclaimed the words contained in the accounts of the evangelists. Like the apostles, Francis preached a message that was simple: Repent and believe in the good news.³⁴

³⁰ *FA:ED* 1, 261.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

³² Refers to a popular legend in 1C XXI, *FA:ED* 1, 234.

³³ Cook, *Francis*, 84.

³⁴ In the New Revised Standard Version of the bible, there are twenty-six verses of the New Testament that contain the word “repent” and twenty-one that contain the word “repentance,” some specifically mentioning the need to preach repentance.

Bonaventure carefully noted the insight Francis developed after struggling with the underlying question, which he put to those he loved and trusted: “What do you think, brothers, what do you judge better? That I should spend my time in prayer or that I should travel about preaching?”³⁵ He had Brother Masseo put the question to his trusted friends Brother Sylvester and Sister Clare, asking whether he should “dedicate myself to preaching or ... only to prayer.”³⁶ Brother Masseo came back with this answer: “(Christ) ... revealed that it is His will that you go through the world to preach, because He has not chosen you only for yourself, but rather for the salvation of others.”³⁷ The insight Francis received was that preaching is a paramount part of apostolic action because Jesus had done so: “... the only begotten Son of God, who is the highest wisdom, came down from the bosom of the Father for the salvation of souls in order to instruct the world by his example and to speak the word of salvation to people ...”³⁸

While his apostolic action took many forms, perhaps Francis’s need for balance between prayer and action was most clearly manifested in his preaching. For a time, he struggled with the stress that the juxtaposition of the two inevitably imposes. But that stress was soon transformed into a singular opportunity to conform his life more fully to Christ, who is the supreme model of harmony between prayer and action, and, despite the great spiritualities that arose during the first millennium, one could argue that this precarious equilibrium had been rarely achieved.

If a significant change occurred in Christendom about the relationship between active and contemplative dimensions of life, it is probably to be traced to Francis of Assisi.... (He) would go into the woods to pray alone but also rebuilt crumbling churches (...) As he ministered to lepers and began to preach, he also continued

³⁵ Bonaventure, “The Major Legend of Saint Francis,” XII:1, *FA:ED* 2, 622.

³⁶ “Little Flowers of St. Francis,” 16, *FA:ED* 3, 592.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 592.

³⁸ *LMj* XII:1, *FA:ED* 2, 622.

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to withdraw for prayer as well as borrow the liturgical prayer of the older monastic orders.³⁹

In effect, contemplation and apostolic action were not for him competitive realities but absolutely complementary necessities: “Solitude opens out to the world and bears fruit in preaching.... The eremitism of Saint Francis and his followers is deeply evangelical and remains always open to the world, while recognizing the need to maintain a certain distance and perspective.”⁴⁰

Preaching

Francis’s preaching flowed directly from his mystical prayer, which was decidedly Christocentric. This can be asserted in two ways. First, his preaching touched, not on abstract theological ideas, but on the sacredness and wonder of creation as a mirror of God, its creator. Secondly, he focused on events in Christ’s life on earth as much as he did on his teachings. This relentless reference to Jesus as the Word made man was the natural consequence of a prayer and fraternal life centered on the humanity of Jesus. To fully apprehend this focus on the person of Christ in preaching as well as other forms of Franciscan communication, we must take a step back to examine its interior expression, namely prayer. In the realm of mystical prayer, Francis was innovative; his religious experience dramatically shaped the future of Western Christianity as a pioneer of what has been called “the mysticism of the historical event.”⁴¹

Up to Francis’s time, most Christian prayer had been primarily “soul” mysticism (an interior, neo-platonic, world-transcending prayer) or nature mysticism, which sought contact with God through creation. Francis synthesized

³⁹ Cook, *Francis*, 78.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, “Franciscan Eremitism” in *The Francis Book*, ed. Roy Gasnick (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 48.

⁴¹ Ewert Cousins, “Francis of Assisi: Mysticism at the Crossroads,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 164.

the two with contemporary themes in theology, especially a devotion to the humanity of Christ ushered in by Bernard of Clairvaux. Francis did this by celebrating concrete details of the life of Jesus infusing them with spiritual energy and meaning.⁴²

Francis's preaching was not only centered on Jesus, it was concise: In the Rule of 1223, we find these words, "Moreover, I admonish and exhort those brothers that when they preach their language be well-considered and chaste for the benefit and edification of the people, announcing to them vices and virtues, punishment and glory, with brevity, because our Lord when on earth kept his words brief" (LR 9: 3). At the same time, his preaching was multi-faceted; today we might even call it multi-media. He preached not only with words, but also with deeds, with drama and with art.

If Francis saw in Jesus the exemplar of authenticity, who did what he preached and preached what he did, then he could expect nothing less of himself and those brothers who also preached. His dearest wish was that no one could accuse them of hypocrisy. "They were penitents preaching penance."⁴³ "(His) original intention was to live the Gospel before announcing it, to be an imitator of Christ before being a preacher, to accomplish works of penance (*facere poenitentiam*) before proclaiming them to others (*praedicare poenitentiam*)."⁴⁴

To do so, "Francis did not employ the *modus praedicandi*, i.e., the accustomed technique of priests, but rather the *modus concionandi*, the technique used to address civic assemblies."⁴⁵ This emphasis on personal testimony to his form of life and the faith that underpinned it gave rise to an uncommon style of preaching.

⁴² Warner, *Spirituality*.

⁴³ Warner, *Spirituality*, 10-3.

⁴⁴ Servus Gieben, "Preaching in the Franciscan Order (Thirteenth Century)," *Monks, Nuns, and Friars in Medieval Society*, ed. Edward B. King, Jacqueline T. Schaefer and William B. Wadley (Sewanee, Tennessee: The Press of the University of the South, 1989), 4. Hereafter Gieben, *Preaching*.

⁴⁵ Manselli, *Francis*, 184.

Francis's way of preaching was no more like the common rhetoric of the moral exhortation of the doctrinal sermon than it was like the old genre of the homily. Technically, his preaching comes much closer to the popular discourse or harangue which was used in the local town hall or on a square of the Italian commune by the *podesta* or his opponents. This kind of popular rhetoric was called *contio* in opposition to the more cleaned and clerical *sermo*.⁴⁶

Although we have no record of sermons delivered by Francis, we do have this first-hand account of his preaching at Bologna in 1222, which underscored the efficacy of his preaching: "Men and women flocked to him; it was a question of who would at least touch the fringe of his clothing or who would tear off a piece of his poor habit."⁴⁷ "His word was like a burning fire."⁴⁸

I saw St. Francis preach in the public square in front of the public place.... His discourse did not belong to the great genre of sacred eloquence, rather they were harangues. In reality, throughout his discourse he spoke of the duty of putting an end to hatreds and of arranging a new treaty of peace.... God conferred so much power on his words that they brought back peace in many a seigniorial family torn apart until then by old, cruel, and furious hatreds.⁴⁹

In effect, Francis preached as though he were a captain exhorting his troops to steel their courage for the battle ahead. But instead of a battle against a human enemy, they needed to gird themselves against evil and its ally, complacency. His goal was to rally his fellow countrymen to undertake conversion and campaign for peace with the same vigor that would be needed to wage a war. Also part of his style was his arresting appearance, his demeanor and his clothing. He

⁴⁶ Gieben, *Preaching*, 5.

⁴⁷ Gieben, *Preaching*, 6.

⁴⁸ 1C X, *FA:ED* 1, 202.

⁴⁹ Gieben, *Preaching*, 6.

used these purposefully to accentuate the dramatic tone he sought to create.⁵⁰

If his style was unlike that used in standard sermons, so was the content. In his *Early Rule*, we find two chapters that deal explicitly with preaching,⁵¹ and both are evidently influenced by the decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.⁵² The Council had imposed stringent rules about who had the authority to preach because of concern regarding the preaching of heretics.⁵³ But, “the preaching which the Council had in mind dealt with questions of faith and morality, consequently with doctrinal and moral sermons, not with the simple exhortation the friars might offer as they travelled about among country-people and citizens.”⁵⁴ To be on the safe side, this *regula non bulata* also included a sample sermon: “And whenever it may please them, all my brothers can proclaim this or a like exhortation and praise among all the people with the blessing of God ...”⁵⁵ In the later rule, solemnly approved by Pope Honorius III in 1223, chapter nine is dedicated to preaching: “From the first sentence on, it appears that the Order is conscious of its apostolic mission, which does not depend on the authority of a bishop, though

⁵⁰ Manselli refers to Boncompagno of Signa, a teacher of rhetoric: “He was a contemporary of the saint and dedicated an entire book in his *Rhetorica novissima* to the art of *concionare* (declamation, haranguing)... The oratorical technique made use above all of means aimed at provoking the sensitivity and imagination of those present. For example, says Boncompagno, if someone wants to advocate a proposal of war, he should show up at the assembly wearing arms. He should then roll his eyes fiercely, speak with an excited voice, flail about, and fling himself in desperation to the ground. The whole time he should be making a racket by rattling his armour and weapons,” Manselli, *Francis*, 184-85.

⁵¹ “He was the first to write a chapter about missionary work in a religious rule.” Warner, *Franciscans*, 10-1.

⁵² Gieben, *Preaching*, 7.

⁵³ The Council’s third decree “had established, besides other sanctions, that ‘all those who, unlicensed or lacking a mission, without authorization by the Apostolic See or the catholic local bishop, presume to usurp the office of public or private teaching, be excommunicated and, unless they make a prompt amendment, be punished in another appropriate way.’” *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

his authority must be respected.”⁵⁶ As though to avoid controversy regarding doctrine, this article made it clear that “the friar’s sermons should concern morality and the practice of Christian life.”⁵⁷

Emphasizing his vocation as preacher, early biographers recount his preaching to birds on the road to Bevagna, referred to earlier, as being a pivotal event in his life. Certainly, it is one of the most colorful. Here, we venture out of the realm of verifiable historical fact. While accounts of his preaching to birds are often repeated, embellishments are varied and questionable. But they do give eloquent witness to his loving regard for Creation, whether human or not, animate or inanimate, to the core of the message he conveyed, and to the attentive response that his preaching elicited, a proposition that is surely well founded.

An integral part of the mission that Francis embraced was the building and preservation of the harmony he found in Creation into the brotherhood of humanity. His self-understanding was as an instrument of the peace that God intended for the people he created in the image of the Holy Trinity. Insofar as Christ entered human history in order to bring to an anguished world a peace that is not of this world, Francis was prepared to serve that purpose, which summarizes all of the others, for it is the ultimate harvest of sowing faith, hope, love; pardon, light and joy:⁵⁸ “... [W]henver they entered especially a city, estate, town, or home, they announced peace, encouraging everyone to fear and love the Creator of heaven and earth and to observe the commandments.”⁵⁹ “Francis loved, preached and lived peace, and one cannot understand Franciscan spirituality without an appreciation for a deep sense of peace permeating all aspects of life.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁸ Such are the sentiments expressed in the so-called “Prayer of St. Francis.” Although not written by him, it is generally agreed to have been inspired by him, and does reflect beliefs expressed in the Admonitions.

⁵⁹ L3C X: 37, *FA:ED* 2, 90.

⁶⁰ Warner, *Spirituality*, 12-3.

In essence, peace was for Francis the litmus test of Gospel living, and the fruit of love: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5:9). This implied for him far more than simple self-restraint or episodic moments of respite in an otherwise hostile world. Its active ingredients were understood to be respect and compassion. It called for the humility to serve as lesser brothers and sisters in the spirit of Christ and for self-emptying. Indeed, the deliberate dedication of one's life to peacemaking represented for Francis a type of *kenosis*.⁶¹

Despite reservations about his ability and worthiness to preach,⁶² Francis was prepared to be regarded as a fool for Christ, poor in ability,⁶³ in order to accept the evangelical challenge to preach repentance and the adoption of Gospel values. Given his emphasis on building community, he could no more refrain from urging others to repent and believe in the Gospel than he could from doing so himself, for this was the basic meaning on his faith. In essence, preaching the Gospel for Francis was inseparable from living the Gospel life. There would be no Gospel to live without the incarnate word, and the incarnate word would have no meaning if it were not communicated. The two were complementary; indeed, the two were indissociable and perhaps even indistinguishable.

⁶¹ Martyrdom appears in many forms in Franciscan life and communications: "Some are martyred in Morocco; some like Giles, embrace what he calls the "martyrdom of contemplation"; some, like Francis and Bonaventure, are martyred in community; some like Clare receive the martyrdom of illness and struggle with the Church; others, by creative work in the world. All are martyred in the cause of peace, searching dominantly for the presence of Christ and a way to make that presence effective." Joseph P. Chinnici, "The Lord Give You Peace," *Westfriars*, February 1985, 1. Hereafter Chinnici, *Peace*.

⁶² "I am a poor little man, simple and unskilled in speech; I have received a greater grace of prayer than of speaking." Bonaventure, LMj XII, FA:ED 2, 622.

⁶³ Judging from the efficacy of his preaching, one might assume that his modest self assessment was more an expression of religious value than the result of authentic subjectivity or critical realism.

Drama

It is for that reason that we must look upon Francis's physical presentation of himself and his message as a deliberate form of communication. There is no doubt that he had an intuitive sense of dramatic style and an astute appreciation of the impact of theatrical devices. One cannot consider his dress and gestures without seeing an intention to create an effect. Similarly, one cannot fail to appreciate the far-reaching impact of so grand a gesture as his foolhardy journey across the frontiers of a holy war to embrace a Moslem prince or his dramatic re-enactment of the Lord's Nativity, not with gold and incense, but with an ox and an ass.

To teach by example, as Francis evidently did, "requires an injection of self into one's social context."⁶⁴ But his injection of self was more than mere example: "The extreme nature of Francis's behavior – having himself dragged naked through the streets like a criminal for having eaten a little meat while ill – led Bonaventure in the *Legenda maior* to caution against viewing his actions as exemplary."⁶⁵

The onlookers were amazed at the extraordinary spectacle and ... they were deeply moved, but they made no secret of the fact that they thought his humility was rather to be admired than imitated. His action certainly seems to have been intended rather as an omen reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah than as an example.⁶⁶

Clearly, Francis's communication was dramatic. To get a glimpse into the effect that he and his first followers had on the citizens of Assisi and surrounding communities, we must think not in terms of the cautious and sober presentation of the Gospel that we find in most churches today, but "as if the friars were a kind of medieval combination of charismatic

⁶⁴ Hester Goodenough Gelber, "A Theatre of Virtue: The Exemplary World of St. Francis of Assisi," in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 15 ff.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

enthusiasm and the street wisdom of the Salvation Army. In such a context we may begin to imagine how the theatrical impulse ... may have appealed to Francis of Assisi and his medieval followers."⁶⁷

We know that at this time the Franciscans in Italy were already employing scriptural plays in their evangelical efforts. Secondly, we know that, as in their use of vernacular lyric, Franciscans soon obtained the extensive involvement of laymen through the development of confraternities.⁶⁸

Francis's dramatic presentation of Gospel truths poses for us who view this behavior from afar with a problem of understanding how measured he might have been and how suitable is his communication for our own time. There is no question that he had a monumental impact on people in his day, largely due to his keen abilities in communication, but his use of dramatic gestures to create a desired effect in particular must be evaluated in light of the price he paid for that effect:

Francis of Assisi was an effective teacher who intentionally illustrated the life of virtue in his own way of living. He was a teacher in the sense that the Hebrew prophets, Socrates or Gandhi were teachers. He was a performance artist for whom drama functioned pedagogically. His life was not meant to be an example to his followers; sometimes it was a dramatic lesson, meant to be watched, not imitated. All drama is inherently a distortion of reality because it focuses the attention on one aspect of reality. Francis's dramatized life distorts the importance of poverty, but this is a distortion from which we may be able to learn if we are able to imaginatively identify with Francis. For

⁶⁷ David Jeffrey, "St. Francis and Medieval Theatre," in *Franciscan Studies* 41 (1983): 322.

⁶⁸ Jeffrey, 325.

The Cord, 59.2 (2009)

Francis, asceticism was a form of obedience, and obedience a mode of knowledge.⁶⁹

Writing

The *Early Rule* chronicled not only the systematic early development of the Franciscan Order but also “the development of the movement’s linguistic culture.”⁷⁰ As well, *The Admonitions* presented a lexicon that is key to the proper understanding of Francis’s intended message. He adopted words that had particular resonance for his culture, particularly relating to evangelical living (*operibus praedicient*), working (*opera Domini*) and good things (*bona*).⁷¹ To understand the mind of Francis, we must become deeply steeped into the language he used and the purpose for which he communicated:

Franciscan culture is the meaning intrinsic to Franciscan practices. It did not begin with the scriptural passages quoted in Chapter One of the *Early Rule*; it began with their practical interpretation. (We have no Gospel. We only have interpretations of the Gospel)... Francis wanted his brothers to involve themselves in what they all had said and done up to that moment, well reported in the *Early Rule*. Such involvement was an integral part of Franciscan life. And Francis gave his brothers a brace of admonitions (XX and XXI) to help them do it.⁷²

But it is his *Testament* that most concerns us now as we conclude our study of Francis’s communication and the long journey that led to it. In fact, at least two documents can be generally called testaments, one being chapter 22 of his *Early*

⁶⁹ Laura Smit, *The Aesthetic Pedagogy of Francis of Assisi* (online www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Medi/MediSmit)

⁷⁰ David Flood, “Why Francis Talked the Way He Did,” in *The Cord* 51.5 (2001): 218-27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁷² Flood, *Talked*, 225-27.

Rule, and the message that Francis appears to have dictated near the end of his life. Before we begin an appreciation of it as authentic and effective communication, we must bear in mind David Flood's caution that "we do not know how the text reached its final shape, nor do we know how it began circulating among the brothers. It belonged to the nature of the text as his parting words that Francis exercised no control over its final shape and publication."⁷³

Francis seems to have intended *The Testament* to be read in tandem with the rule: "His words exemplify the brothers' relationship to the rule as we find it in Chapter Twenty-Four of the *Early Rule*."⁷⁴ But, although this latter testament was clearly rooted in memories of the order's origins and the ideas expressed in the *Early Rule*, "from the first lines of the *Testament* on, Francis has in mind the text of 1223. By recalling history and administering a few stern corrections, he integrates a text of compromise (a canonical *regula*) into Franciscan life."⁷⁵ Francis must have felt the dangers of division, as already some brothers were inclined toward the original charism and others toward later developments, a danger he was powerless to prevent as discussions about the rule reached an impasse at the general chapter of 1230, only four years after his death. In fact, Francis had tried to impose unity by giving legal force to *The Testament*, which was crafted as a worthy and masterful attempt to bridge differences, but he lacked the canonical authority to do so.

In *Quo elongati*, Pope Gregory first declared that he knew perfectly what Francis had in mind in wording (in legislating) the rule as he did; and then he brought into operation the culture and the language capable of clearing up the obscurities brought to his attention (more precisely, he said that the brothers had asked him for help because he knew Francis's intentions.) He treated the *Testament* as legally inadmissible and glossed the reference to the Gospel into a legally manageable form. With that done, he addressed the other questions,

⁷³ David Flood, *Regulam Melius Observare* (unpublished essay).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

beginning with money, handling everything in the terms of his canonical and ecclesial culture.⁷⁶

My purpose in citing this here is not to bring into question the suitability of these glosses but to underscore the fact that the *Testament* is an important communication precisely because it disturbed those who had issues with Francis's understanding and communication of Gospel meaning and value. The appeal for such glosses had more to do with the clarity than the ambiguity of his ultimate communication. Pope Gregory's *Quo elongati* was not to be the final word on our understanding of Francis's communication. While Brother Elias dominated the order as minister general during the 1230s and discouraged discussion of the rule, contrary to Francis's explicit wishes, open debate resumed during the 1240s and has continued arguably to our own day.

The question facing anyone wishing to communicate Francis's spiritual insights to our own culture is this one: Was Francis's way of looking at things compatible with our own? Certainly he was not a critical realist in the sense that we understand that expression today – nor could he have been. But relative to the context in which we must situate him, it may be said that he was naturally disposed to such an outlook. His struggle with religious questions was chiefly caused by his determination to be authentic. Can we today authentically appropriate and effectively communicate his spirituality without such an attitude? I suggest that we cannot. It would be folly to simplistically imitate someone from so foreign a culture. Yet it would be equally foolish to disregard his insights and the stunning parallels that exist between his socio-political and ecclesial environment and our own. It would be regrettable to set aside a tradition that carries with it a unique capacity to help us understand the desire that dwells within each of us, namely to find ultimate meaning and to fall in love.

The challenge is to communicate these insights with language that resonates for people today, particularly those who are unfamiliar with the expressions and even the categories

⁷⁶ Ibid.

of traditional religious discourse and the rituals of its celebration and worship. It is also to use the stories of Francis's life in new ways to engender passion in faith and compassion in love. It is finally to leverage genuine conversion in the hearts, minds and spirits of God's people. These challenges call us to be creative in the way we present Francis, always mindful of the adaptations required, and always recalling that Francis communicated by his life more than by his words ... as Jesus had done. While Francis's form of theology can be described as "archaic,"⁷⁷ his spirituality is timeless because it continues to "elicit our wonder and to inspire our feeble attempts to follow (him) in his dedication to the *vita evangelii Jesu Christi*."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Francis's form of theology is (...), as Thaddée Matura has put it, 'archaic,' in the sense that it harkens back to the richest forms of early Christian theology, such as we find in the Apostolic Fathers, before the differentiation of individual doctrines has had a chance to develop. Thus, in Francis's writings the many aspects of Christian belief appear together in a rich stew that can be difficult to digest for those who are more used to taking one part of the meal after another, that is, absorbing the distinctions and articulations of themes and doctrines found in most later theology. Hans Urs von Balthasar has shown how the differentiation of spirituality and theology, already at work in the late patristic period, became a separation in the later Middle Ages – a sundering that has had unfortunate consequences down to the present. Francis's archaizing theology is a good antidote to any incipient attempt to separate doctrinal insight and spiritual practice." Bernard McGinn, "Reflections on St. Francis at the New Millennium," in *Franciscan Studies* 58 (2000): 12-13.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.