

I

THE PRAYER LIFE

*of
Francis of Assisi*

First, a Story
FRANCIS AND LEO
CANNOT AGREE IN
RESPONSIVE PRAYER

FRANCIS was out walking one day with Brother Leo, his closest friend and companion, when it came time to pray the Divine Office. It was in the earliest days of Francis's new movement, when the brothers lived in the utmost simplicity; for this reason, and given their remote location, Francis and Leo had no books at hand when the hour for Morning Prayer had come.

Francis said to Leo: "Since we do not have a breviary with us, but it is still important that we spend time praising God, let us create something new.

"I will speak and you will answer, as I teach you.

"I will say 'O Brother Francis, you have done so many sins and evils in this world. You are deserving of hell.'

"And you, Leo, will respond, 'So it is, Francis, you deserve the lowest depths of hell.'"

Brother Leo nodded that he understood and gave Francis assurances of his perfect obedience. "Let us begin, Father," he agreed.

And so Francis began the new liturgy. He said, "You have done so many sins and evils in

this world, Brother Francis, that you are deserving of hell.”

“But God will work through you so much good,” Leo replied earnestly, “that surely you will go to paradise.”

“No, no, no,” Francis said, “that is not right. When I say my part, you must say as I have instructed you, repeating, ‘You are worthy only to be set among the cursed in the depths of hell.’”

Again, in obedience, Brother Leo replied, “Willingly, Father.”

This time Francis paused and painfully considered his words. After a few moments, with tears in his eyes and while pounding his heart Francis said in a much louder voice: “O Lord of heaven and earth, I have done so much evil and so many sins in this world that I am worthy only to be cursed by you!”

And Leo replied in turn: “O Brother Francis, God will do great things for you and you will be blessed above all others!”

Francis was perplexed and more than a little bit angry.

“Why do you disobey me, Brother Leo? You are to repeat as I have instructed you!”

“God knows, Father,” Leo answered, “that each time I set my mind to do as you say, God then makes me say what pleases him.”

How could Francis argue with this? He marveled at Leo’s words, searching them for the

divine purpose. Nevertheless, after some time, Francis quietly said, “I pray most lovingly that you will answer me this time as I have asked you to do.” Leo agreed to try, but try as he might, again and again, he could not do as Francis wished.

Time after time, into the night, past compline and throughout the early hours of the morning, the entreaties of Francis grew ever more passionate as Leo’s joy grew ever larger. Their prayers never did match, and they never did agree, praying responsively as Francis had hoped.



Francis taught the first spiritual explorers drawn to understand and imitate his life—the way to a deeper relationship with God through prayer. He showed these men and women how to pray, he gave them words to get them started, and he insisted on the dailyness of the practice. Like the first followers of the little poor man from Assisi, Francis invites us to join him in the prayer and spirituality that punctuated his life at every turn.

Francis approached God from many directions; his prayer life demonstrates the varied ways that he intertwined himself with God, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. He maintained delicate balances, such as balancing joy and song with penitence and prostration. He prayed at times in community as a leader would conduct a

band in a riotous tune, but he also used prayer as form of penitence, occasionally sentencing additional prayers to those whose minds seemed idle. His prayer life was intricate and of one piece with his broad spirituality. We might also try to strike these balances in our practices of prayer. But at the very least, we should try to pray each day, perhaps many times throughout the day, with the words and spirit of Francis.

Francis viewed prayer as a tool for overcoming pride and sinfulness. For him, it was a training of the soul and body to live in eternity and not in the world. With this in mind, Francis became a champion of prayer while still a young man, and through his early experiences at prayer, he found guidance on the way to his conversion. The Spirit taught him to pray. This “inner work” never ended for Francis, as he continually saw the effects of original sin in his own life and used prayer to stamp them out.

He probably began praying in earnest in the early months of the year 1206, when he was twenty-four years old. He still lived in his father’s house at this time, and it is unlikely that he received much religious instruction there. Although his mother wished a deep love of God for her only son, Francis’s father, Peter Bernardone, held little respect for the Church. This was the time in Francis’s life when he struggled finally to overcome his repulsion of lepers, and

the filth and disease that they represented. In his final will and testament, written just before his death twenty years later, Francis connected his conversion to this time in his young adulthood.

Also at this critical stage in his life, Francis became sensitive for the first time to his need to spend time alone in quiet. A rowdy youth and king of many carnivals in Assisi, young Francis's turning away from carousing and revelry and turning toward solitude was another important stage of his receptivity to the Spirit. His prayer life could not have grown otherwise. He needed time alone to meet himself, and to meet God.

Now interested in religion, with basic capacities forming in him so that he could accept and understand its subtleties, Francis soon began to use prayer as an essential tool for discernment of the will of God in his life. When Bernard of Quintavalle, a wealthy man of Assisi, became the first to ask Francis what it might mean to follow him in his new spiritual work, the young saint insisted that they pray together at the bishop's house from early morning until terce (9 AM). Only then would they be ready to open the Scriptures together and discover the will of God.

Also early on in his religious life, Francis asked two of his most trusted friends—Brother Sylvester, the first priest to join the Order, and Sister Clare, the first woman to join the movement—to pray for him, seeking God's will for his vocation.

Francis could not discern for which purpose his life was intended. On the one hand, he felt drawn to a life of asceticism and contemplative prayer, like many religious before him, but on the other hand he felt called to a life among the people of Italy, preaching, ministering, and caring for them. Brother Sylvester and Sister Clare, after days of prayer on Francis's behalf, confirmed the latter as God's true desire, and Francis took this as if from God's very own lips. He believed in signs and in genuine intercession.

From the earliest days of his intentional spiritual life, Francis was committed to a daily prayer practice. Although he never viewed his new movement as a traditional monastic one (the early Franciscans were mendicant friars, quite distinct from cloistered monks), he nevertheless was a keeper of fixed-hour prayer, as it is often called in liturgical churches today. Cloistered monks, whose vocation is the contemplative life, sing or chant these prayers—mostly from the Psalms—in choir for hours on end each day. But because Francis never intended to stay put in one place for very long, daily prayer took on a different meaning in his movement. His prayers were peripatetic, and his spirituality was, too.

Francis maintained a regular prayer life through the praying of the Divine Office. The word “office” used in this context is from a Latin

word meaning “work.” This ancient form of fixed-hour prayer, also known as the Liturgy of the Hours, or the work of God, was inherited by the early Christians from Judaism. The Hebrew psalmists and the lives of the prophets (e.g., Daniel) are full of references to fixed-hour prayer—in the morning, at noon, in the evening; one psalm even says, “Seven times a day do I praise you” (Psalm 119:164). The Divine Office is distinct from the saying of the Mass, and has always been faithfully kept not just by clergy, monks, and nuns, but also by laypeople. Francis claimed this type of prayer for his vocation, and taught his followers to practice it. Regardless of his many travels—for he was forever on the road—Francis prayed “the Hours,” probably remaining the most faithful to the traditional times of morning and evening prayer.

He would pray with his brothers regardless of where he was. His first biographer, Thomas of Celano, who was also a contemporary of Francis, wrote: “When he was travelling the world on foot, he always would stop walking in order to say the Hours, and when he was on horseback he would dismount to be on the ground.” Many of us today find ourselves praying in the strangest of places (a stall in the restroom works well for private noontime prayers) in order to keep our everyday lives tuned to God’s ear.

At this period in time, almost all prayer was spoken aloud, and at times this was difficult for Francis: “[Even when] he was suffering from diseases of the eyes, stomach, spleen, and liver, he did not want to lean against a wall or partition when he was chanting the Psalms. He always fulfilled his hours standing up straight and without a hood, without letting his eyes wander and without dropping syllables.” This reminds me of the elderly couple who physically struggle but determinedly make their way to the front of our church each Sunday for the taking of Communion.

But in addition to those times when Francis would pray together with his brothers and sisters, Francis also prayed often in solitude. Contemplative prayer outside of the cloister was uncommon in Francis’s day, but both Francis and many of his brothers spent hours each week alone with God. When Francis spent time alone, it was usually in order to find a more intimate, mystical communion with God. Perhaps, on these occasions, his reciting of the words of the prayer books and scriptures turned into something more, as the words of the Psalms and the Gospels became resting places for Francis in the bosom of the Unknown. Francis experienced both spoken prayers and aphasic communications with God.

His favorite places to pray alone were woods, rocky caves, cliffs, and abandoned churches. Francis, with his restless spirit, easily understood

the passion of the psalmists. Sometimes a trusted friend would accompany Francis on long walks to these distant places; other times, he would set out alone. When he was quiet and alone, he sometimes prayed aloud. He would often accuse himself before God, calling himself "Vain!" and "Coward!" Francis wondered aloud to God, asking many searching questions. Who was he to have "followers"? Why hadn't God found him worthy for martyrdom when he had traveled to Syria to see the Sultan? Was his whole life a mistake? Should he have married and had children? Why had he survived serious illness when others had not? Francis came to know his own heart very well, and he accused it of every possible hint of selfishness.

Francis always returned to the most basic spiritual questions. Toward the end of his life, an eavesdropping Brother Leo overheard Francis asking plaintively: "Who are you, my dearest God? And what am I?" Unlike some more famous mystics, his contemplation never steered far from his own sinfulness.

One reason for Francis's preference to pray in seclusion was his sensitivity to avoid the appearance of showing off. He wanted to heed the warning of Jesus about hypocrites: "they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues [and the churches!]" and at the street corners for people to see them" (Matthew 6:5). Francis also took seriously

the words of Christ when he instructed his disciples to go into their room and close the door to pray. Like many of the church fathers and mothers before him, Francis probably interpreted this verse both spiritually and literally. In the spiritual sense, our prayers are times when we are alone before God; our doors are shut against worldly concerns and distractions, and we spend intimate time with our Creator, our Redeemer, our Friend. In the literal sense, a closed door brings the quiet and solitude that are necessary for proper intention and attention in prayer. Francis also surely believed, as did his contemporaries, that demons want to assail us when we pray, and demons can only know our thoughts (and hence, our prayers) if we give them verbal expression. So, we should be quiet at times and passionately inward in our prayers.

He loved to pray in the middle of the night while his brothers were asleep. At these most impassioned times, the postures of prayer became important to Francis. *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, a collection of legends and stories from Francis's life, tells often of the saint's penitent postures in contemplative prayer. He was expressive and his movements dramatic. At times, he would beat his chest while on his knees, pounding his breast again and again as if to awaken his restive heart, and at other times he would raise his hands, lifting them as to the heavens. On one such occasion,

Francis was desperately seeking Christ through this sort of combination of spiritual, mental, and physical effort. "And at last he found Him," the text reads, "in the secret depths of his heart. And he spoke to Him reverently as to his Lord. Then he answered Him as his Judge. Next he entreated Him as a Father. Then he talked with Him as with a friend." What an extraordinary theology of prayer these lines represent.

One of the stories of Francis's nighttime prayers took place during one of his many preaching tours. He stopped on his way at a little house the brothers were using, and after joining them for the evening prayer of compline, decided to retire early with the intent of waking in the middle of the night to pray in solitude while the other brothers slept.

At this time, a young boy who had recently joined the Order was staying at the house. He had heard the wonders of their master and founder and, with childlike curiosity, he wanted to watch, listen, and understand more about St. Francis for himself.

Soon after Francis lay down to sleep on one of the mats on the floor, the young boy lay down closely beside him. The boy quietly and gently tied his tunic cord to the cord of Francis, so that when Francis arose in the middle of the night, as he was rumored to often do, the boy would feel it. When Francis woke, he saw that he was attached to the boy. Before rising, he quietly

loosed the cords, leaving the lad sound asleep. Francis then left the house silently and entered the nearby woods to pray. The boy, a short time later, awoke and saw that Francis was gone. Seeing the door leading to the woods slightly ajar, he believed that his master had gone there. When he drew near and spied Francis praying in a small clearing, he saw great visions of light surrounding Francis, and saints conversing with him as with a close friend. The young boy fainted and the next he knew, Francis was carrying him in his arms, as a good shepherd does for his sheep, back to the house.

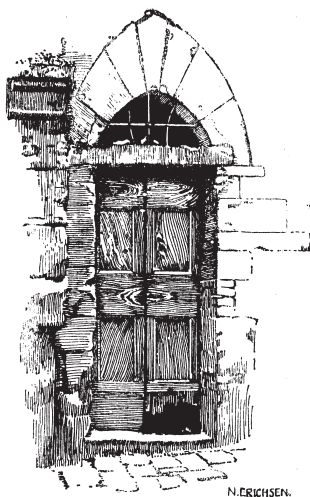
But Francis did not allow himself, or his brothers, to spend an excessive amount of time alone in contemplative prayer. He believed that there could be too much of a good thing, and that their lives were primarily intended for serving others. On one occasion, Francis confronted his friend and spiritual brother, Rufino, who had taken to contemplation so much that, over time, he had become almost mute in his love of God. He rarely spoke, and never went out to preach, as the other brothers did, for he spent all of his time in quiet meditation, absorbed in the divine mysteries. One day, Francis asked Rufino to go into Assisi and preach to the people, listening for God's inspiration. Rufino answered, "Reverend Father, please pardon me and do not send me. I do not have the gift of preaching, but am only simple and ignorant." But Francis commanded

Rufino to go, and because of his hesitance and disobedience insisted that he preach to the people in the utmost simplicity and humility—wearing only his breeches. Francis did not shy away from prescribing radical cures for spiritual ills. Rufino did as he was asked, but Francis soon joined him, also wearing only his breeches.

An idealist to be sure, Francis was never a perfectionist in prayer. He always allowed for human frailty before God and we see his own doubts and weaknesses again and again, some of them remarkably simple, like our own. On one occasion, while Francis and his three closest brothers were spending the days of Lent high atop Mount Verna in Italy, Francis had trouble waking before dawn in time for morning prayers. A combination of weariness and idleness was keeping him from his spiritual work until a mother falcon sitting on her nest near his thatched roof cell began to wake him each morning. A few minutes before matins (just before sunrise), she would make noise, waking Francis to pray. He was grateful for this outside assistance and many legends grew up around the story of that simple bird.

Francis's praying had great joy and passion, whether he was alone or with others. But prayer, even for the great St. Francis, was not always wonderful. Not only did he, like us, find it difficult at times to get out of bed in the morning in order to

spend time with his Creator, but Francis's prayers were not always regular and joyful. They were occasionally full of torment. Francis spent thousands of hours throughout his life in seclusion, much of it in a thunderous silence before God. Occasionally, at these times, Francis would use fasting as a part of his prayer practice, which added bodily weariness to an already intense spiritual experience. He was also sometimes lonely, feeling isolated in his vocation. Particularly in the last few years of his life, we can observe Francis's prayer life growing most intense, as he felt that his own order was separating more and more from his original ideals.



Another Story
FRANCIS AND THE
YOUNG NOVICE
WHO WANTED TO OWN A
PRAYER BOOK

ONE DAY ST. FRANCIS was sitting before a fire when a young novice drew near to speak with him again about acquiring a psalter. The novice, knowing how passionately the master felt about Brothers Minor not owning things, was nevertheless asking again for his permission to own his own prayer book.

“Then, when you have your psalter,” Francis said to him, “you will want a breviary, too. And when you own a breviary you will seat yourself in a pulpit like a great prelate and beckon to your companions, saying in a proud voice, ‘Bring me my breviary!’”

Francis said this with great vivacity, like an actor in a play, motioning as a king would to his subjects. Then, taking up some cool ashes from the nearby fire, he smeared them on the forehead of the novice, saying: “There is the breviary! There is the breviary!”

Several days later, Francis was walking up and down along the roadside not far from his cell when the same young brother came to speak to

him about his psalter. He asked yet again for Francis's permission to own one.

"Very well," Francis replied reluctantly and wearily. "Go on, you have only to do what your minister tells you." (This all occurred soon after Francis had lost control of his Order, and Peter of Catana was the new minister-general of the Brothers Minor.) At these words, the novice hurried away, but Francis, reflecting on what he had said, called out to the friar, crying, "Wait for me!"

Francis ran quickly to catch up with the boy, saying, "Retrace your steps a little way, I beg you. Where was I when I told you to do whatever your minister told you as to the psalter?"

They retraced their steps, as Francis had requested, finding the spot along the road near Portiuncula where their brief exchange had just taken place. Falling on his knees, there, Francis prostrated himself at the feet of the boy, crying, "Pardon, my brother, pardon, for what I said, for truly, he who would be a true Brother Minor ought to have nothing but his clothing!"



We see Francis's heart clearly in the story of his exchange with the young brother wanting to own a prayer book. He had an unwavering passion for Christ and knowledge from firsthand experience that it is all too easy for things to stand in the way of our full-time love of God. We, too, should

examine ourselves for the obstructions that stand in our way. Most often, we have either put them there or allowed them to creep in. Even prayer books, Francis believed, such as the one you hold in your hands, can sometimes be an obstacle, rather than a ladder, to God. We can sometimes take too much comfort in the written prayers of our books, and these can become more important to us than using these same words in our lives. Francis believed that the owning of prayer books—and even the saying of prayers themselves—are not the same as relationship and intimacy with God. They are tools for our use, but by themselves they cannot produce a passion for God.

As a passionate reformer, Francis insisted that religion not be only rote, but heartfelt and true. This little prayer book is your invitation to follow Francis on his way—a unique way, to be sure, and one that is as relevant now as it was centuries ago. Francis wanted those who followed in his footsteps be the closest of friends with God, true followers of Jesus Christ, without need for anything else. Through Francis, we can learn prayer that is best made in community, but also the depths of prayer that is private and solitary. Both are necessary for a rich Christian life.

Prayer was to Francis as play is to a child—natural, easy, creative, and joyful. Before it became common to speak in personal terms of a relationship with God, Francis did so and made

it seem natural. He was what we might call an intimate of the Divine. Like Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus on Mount Tabor, he heard God's word to him with great clarity, and from an intimate distance. The Brothers Minor (which was Francis's preferred name for himself and his followers) whom he taught to pray, displayed a similar spirit. That is why Brother Giles, one of the first generation of Franciscans, was able to say with confidence: "He who does not know how to pray does not know God." The earliest followers of St. Francis knew from him that to know God is to pray; it was not supposed to be difficult.

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Many of Francis's prayers originated in the words of Scripture, because he found all of the emotions he was feeling already expressed there so clearly. Francis memorized large portions of the Bible, and he appears to have instructed his followers to do the same. He was most familiar with the Psalms and the Gospels and quoted them from memory when dictating to one of his followers a letter or an addition to the Rule, the written instruction intended to guide the spiritual and everyday life of the friars. Such memorization was common in Francis's day.*

*See the appendix to this book, "Memorization and Prayer in the Middle Ages," pp.141-143.