

THE ST. FRANCIS HOLY FOOL
PRAYER BOOK

THE
St. Francis
HOLY FOOL

Prayer Book

BY
JON M. SWEENEY



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The St. Francis Holy Fool Prayer Book

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
HOW IT IS GOOD TO BE A FOOL

x

I
LOOKING TO ST. FRANCIS AND
BROTHER JUNIPER *for*

INSPIRATION

8

II
How FOOLS MIGHT PRAY
—AT LEAST FOR A WEEK

23

SEVEN THEMES FOR SEVEN DAYS

8

III

A HOLY FOOL'S DAILY OFFICE

Sunday

27

Monday

33

Tuesday

39

Wednesday

45

Thursday

51

Friday

57

Saturday

63

IV

OCCASIONAL PRAYERS FOR FOOLS

69

viii

V
FOUR STORIES
of BROTHER JUNIPER
from *The Little Flowers*

When Juniper Went Naked to Town

95

When Juniper Cooked for the Friars

97

Why Juniper Played on a Seesaw in Rome

101

How Juniper Became Rapt with Ecstasy
One Day at Mass

103

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

105

NOTES

107

INDEX

113

INTRODUCTION

HOW IT IS GOOD TO BE A FOOL

I will always remember the day I decided to introduce my preschool-age daughter to one of my favorite movies, *Singing in the Rain*, starring Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, and Debbie Reynolds. We sat and watched it together on the couch. She didn't wiggle much and laughed at the right places. I knew she was enjoying it.

But then we got to the title song and dance number. There was Gene Kelly, blissfully enjoying a rainstorm. You probably remember how he runs back and forth across a city street at nighttime in the pouring rain, singing at the top of his lungs, tap-dancing by stomping in puddles, grinning at a cop on patrol, becoming completely drenched in his business clothes. He is wearing a suit—and even gives away his umbrella!

As my daughter and I watched, I laughed out loud and was grinning ear to ear. That's what I always do when I watch that scene. She watched carefully, and was smiling, but to my surprise, she then turned to me in the middle of the scene and said, "That's kind of stupid, Dad."

She was only four at the time, but I was sort of offended. I don't know for certain why. Forget that she said the word "stupid" for a moment; we'll deal with that another day. Why was I bothered by her reaction? It isn't as if the movie has anything intimately or immediately to do with *me*, but I wanted her to

like it as I did. “Why?” I implored. Then I suddenly realized that I probably knew what she meant by what she said. So I revised. “Do you mean . . . because he’s getting all wet?”

“Yeah,” she replied, still smiling, looking at the screen. The puddle-stomping continued even as we talked, and she was still trying to figure out the meaning of the scene. “But he’s being kind of stupid,” she added, yet again.

How do I answer this? I thought. How do I get her to understand what this means?

Adults easily understand that what Gene Kelly is doing is anything but stupid. But can his spirit be communicated in words? I at least gave it another try. “Not *stupid*, honey,” I said. “Maybe he’s just being . . . *foolish*?”

Maybe.



A child can’t really appreciate what “foolish” means, nor how being a fool can be a virtue, a really good thing. Nor can she appreciate how foolishness might be a healthy sign that something good is happening, or able to happen, in your life. After all, how could someone who is still innocently carefree most of the time—without real responsibilities or stress—understand the absolute delight that can come when we allow ourselves to “let loose” others’ expectations? That’s what Gene Kelly is doing by singing and dancing in the rain: allowing his joy to

overcome his decorum. We adults know this, and that's why we love watching him do it. Probably, we are wishing, deep down, that we could do that too.

G. K. Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*, "Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly."¹ We'd all like to fly like angels—or at least like Gene Kelly.

I might have communicated better with my daughter that day as we watched the movie together if I'd said that Gene Kelly was being "crazy." She sometimes likes to be "crazy" with her friends. They seem to know and appreciate that word for its sense of nonconformity and playfulness. But as an adult, "crazy" is a word that doesn't seem appropriate. I know how it means a lot of things, some clinical, and how sometimes it might be perceived as an insult, or at least out of place. That's why I quickly decided it wasn't the way to go when I was trying to explain why singing in the rain isn't necessarily "dumb."

I used the word "fool" instead, but then again, "fool" is also an insult to many. The word was even used that way—as a kind of insult—in the Hebrew Scriptures, as we will see in a second. But to many Christians throughout history, foolishness has been a goal, a spiritual occupation, even a badge of honor. They have gone out of their way to earn the name *fool*, even when they knew that those who were saying it never intended it as a compliment. They have been "fools for Christ's sake," to quote St. Paul, who says it like this:

Here we are, fools for Christ's sake, while you are the clever ones in Christ; we are weak, while you are strong; you are honored, while we are disgraced. To this day, we go short of food and drink and clothes, we are beaten up and we have no homes; we earn our living by laboring with our own hands; when we are cursed, we answer with a blessing; when we are hounded, we endure it passively; when we are insulted, we give a courteous answer (1 Cor. 4:10–13).

Otherwise known as *holy fools*.

This can be confusing and for good reasons. Even the Bible seems to contradict itself about fools. A fool for Christ's sake is altogether different from the kind of person the psalmist describes when he or she begins, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Ps. 14:1–3). That's not a foolishness to emulate! Nevertheless, St. Paul's foolishness is. The Bible speaks about both kinds of fool—good and bad—but for the most part, the good sort has been lost.

THE GOOD FOOL

The foolishness praised by St. Paul is a way of living out Jesus's teachings in the Beatitudes. "Beatitude" comes from a Latin word that means *happiness*. These are ways to true happiness, and of course they aren't what you might expect. Who is blessed? The poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, people who are peacemakers—not the powerful. Even the "pure of heart"—and the phrase means pretty much what it implies, which is, those who are simple or willingly naive—are singled out as blessed. Do you want to sign up for this sort of blessedness, happiness? Not many do. That's why we call them fools. *Holy* fools.

A Christian can point to Jesus's foolishness as the exemplar, just as Jesus sometimes pointed to the Hebrew prophets as his inspiration for defying others' expectations. Like Jeremiah, Jesus dressed simply. Like Isaiah, Jesus often walked around barefoot, and he didn't know where he was going to sleep at night. Contrary to what religious leaders thought appropriate, Jesus chose a strange mix of people as his followers and friends (women, the poor, despised tax-collectors, the untouchable sick). Occasionally, he went against societal norms and theological expectations with an attitude of naiveté. No matter if someone thought he was "dumb."

Even Jesus's own family thought he was a fool at times—and not the good kind. Just after he appointed his twelve disciples, the Gospel of Mark says: "He went home again, and once more such a

crowd collected that they could not even have a meal. When his relations heard of this, they set out to take charge of him; they said, ‘He is out of his mind’” (Mk. 3:21). In twenty-first-century language, that sounds like they staged an intervention! They wanted to set him straight. Perhaps he was embarrassing the family.

Later, when Jesus was teaching Torah—good rabbi that he was—he invariably shocked his listeners, ratcheting up the expectations of God on those who seek to truly follow him. He said, for example: “You have heard how it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I say this to you, if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–8). Seriously?! What was once a Law of Moses, easy to track in one’s life, just got a whole lot tougher. Who would even know if one was observing a law such as this? The religious leaders of the day thought he was nuts.

Jesus was a holy fool in his not worrying about the outcome or result of his teaching. Most important of all, he was a holy fool for allowing himself to be misunderstood, and later, mocked. He didn’t defend himself when the meaning and purpose of his life was questioned by Pontius Pilate. He was willing to stand physically humiliated before crowds. In these ways alone, without any other agenda, there have been saints throughout history who have sought to imitate our foolish Lord.



I give you the end of a golden string;
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate,
Built in Jerusalem's wall.

—William Blake, from *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the
Giant Albion*²

There is a perfect line, an uncut thread, “a golden string” throughout history that connects the foolishness of Christ with holy fools who have lived in every generation since his death and resurrection. They all have understood how being reviled can be a sign of blessedness or holiness, a true mark of God's Spirit alive inside of someone. When people witnessed this foolishness in Francis of Assisi eight hundred years ago, they called him *pazzo*. That's Italian for “crazy”—so, I guess, we can't avoid the term! The adjective, however, made Francis happy, in the sense that he knew: if they call you crazy or a fool, you must be doing something right!

The first instances of the crazy foolishness in Francis were outpourings of the Spirit in him. In other words, they are difficult to explain if you use only rational or pragmatic ways of understanding: Like when he stripped naked in front of a crowd in order to give everything back to his father that was rightfully his. Or when he began preaching to birds after people didn't seem to pay much heed to his words. Or when he scolded some of those birds for not listening carefully enough and chirping too loudly during Mass. Or when he joined a friend and

disciple in deliberately humiliating himself—Francis had punished his friend by holy obedience (he was, by then, the friend's religious superior) for refusing to preach the Good News. The punishment was: go and preach, then, in your underwear. But a few minutes later, Francis chastised himself for being too severe—and decided to repent by stripping down to his breeches himself and joining the friend in the pulpit.

Why would someone do these things? They don't exactly make sense, do they? And yet, somehow, they did, and do.

Here's another bit of context: At the time that Francis and Brother Juniper, one of his closest friends and first followers, were becoming fools for Christ, there were professional fools—hired in noble and royal courts, as well as traveling from town to town—acting as entertainers but also as truth-tellers. They were often regarded as possessing a strange sort of wisdom come from being detached from the normal ways of the world. They never stopped reminding their audiences that the world will lie to you, deceive you with false appearances; that it may seem rational but actually it is mad. You see such a troupe in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance (act 5, scene 1). They are the grave diggers who appear after Ophelia's suicide, bantering about death, love, and the meaning of life.

However, such fools were often thought untrustworthy, since their profession was to trick people and play parts in a play. Many ordinary people were hesitant to trust Francis and the first Franciscans,

too, linking them with this sort of fool. One early text reads, "Someone among them remarked: 'I wouldn't care to invite them into my house; they would probably steal my belongings.' And because of this, any number of insults were inflicted on them in many places. Therefore they very frequently sought lodging in the porticos of churches or houses."³

But it was often the hired fool, dressed in motley silliness, juggling and telling stories, who was allowed to make jokes at the expense of the mighty. A common man or woman might not dare to say things that a fool could say with impunity. A fool was one who flouted conventions, poked fun at niceties, and got away with it because he was feeble-minded (either pretending, or in reality). They were often regarded as medieval prophets who were able to see or understand things that others could not. Francis and Juniper appreciated these fools and emulated them when they became, as Francis himself put it, "Jugglers for God."⁴



The most famous fool in history is a literary one rather than a religious one. His name is Don Quixote, and of course he is a fictional character drawn in the imagination of sixteenth-century Spanish novelist Miguel Cervantes. There is perhaps no better example of holy foolery than the ways in which Don Quixote acts as a knight errant, or "wandering knight," in an era when knighthood has all but vanished. He is a champion of chivalry, and chivalry is symbolic of

virtue—both values of the past. So when Quixote prepares for battles and saves ladies in distress, we don't quite know whether he does it because he is mad, or because he refuses to be mad like the rest of the world that no longer does such things. And when he does things like tilt at windmills (imagining that they are giants), he seems to be really tipping the scales away from sanity. Yet, the paradox of *Don Quixote* remains—one never knows if its main character is a fool on purpose or by accident, and whether he is, ultimately, saner than all the rest of his contemporaries.

When Cervantes writes this of Don Quixote it is clear that his fool is also somehow heroic: “The truth is that when his mind was completely gone, he had the strangest thought any lunatic in the world ever had, which was that it seemed reasonable and necessary to him, both for the sake of his honor and as a service to the nation, to become a knight errant and travel the world with his armor and his horse to seek adventures and engage in everything he had read that knights errant engaged in, righting all manner of wrongs and, by seizing the opportunity and placing himself in danger and ending those wrongs, winning eternal renown and everlasting fame.”⁵

The first Franciscan friars were just as foolish as that. I even wonder if Cervantes had friars in mind when he created Don Quixote. You only have to replace a few words in those lines just quoted to see what I mean. Francis might almost be Don Quixote:

The truth is that when his mind was completely gone, FRANCIS had the strangest thought any lunatic in the world ever had, which was that it seemed reasonable and necessary to him, both for the sake of his honor and as a service to the WORLD, to become a FRIAR and travel the world with his POVERTY and his RULE to seek adventures and engage in everything he had read that SAINTS engaged in, righting all manner of wrongs and, by seizing the opportunity and placing himself in danger and ending those wrongs, winning eternal renown and everlasting fame.

Men like Francis and Juniper take the Gospel seriously when it asks Christ-followers to “not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and woodworm destroy them and thieves can break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor woodworm destroys them and thieves cannot break in and steal. For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too. The lamp of the body is the eye. It follows that if your eye is clear, your whole body will be filled with light” (Matt. 6:19–22). Or, as one sees in the stories from the start of Francis’s and Juniper’s converted lives, when they follow Jesus just as the first disciples were told to do: “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic” (Lk. 9:3). These became essential teachings in their rule of life.

FOOLS KNOW THE TRUTH

The trouble with the world (majority opinion and societal expectations) as it is, isn't that the world is bad, but that we allow it to tell us who we ought to be. The Gospel is alternative, not mainstream. Remember the Beatitudes? How many people do you know who go seeking meekness, hunger, and peace instead of power? But if we want to follow Jesus, those are the values we'll uphold. And we won't uphold them by being "normal" in this world that is committed to things as they are.

Those who know the truth sometimes have to be foolish in order to communicate it. This is why the prophet Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for years (Isaiah 20), why the prophet Hosea married a harlot in order to make a point about faithfulness (Hosea 1), and why Jeremiah smashed a clay pot—because God told him to forcefully make a point (Jeremiah 19). These are examples of being foolish in order to capture attention—or to subvert established authority. Neither Isaiah nor Hosea cared a wit about their reputations; they cared, instead, about changing minds.

They also understood that there is a Mystery that explains life—and that Mystery is never fully grasped through reason alone. Knowing the truth ultimately involves a kind of "letting go" of the way that our brain seeks to control our small world. Again, to quote G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* (the chapter "The Maniac" is required reading for all fools), "The whole secret of mysticism is this: that we can understand everything

by the help of what we do not understand.”⁶ The holy fool can see more, can understand more, can grasp her connection to a world that is endless, but only by accepting its mystery. This time, to paraphrase Chesterton, the fool is sane because he’s able to float easily in an infinite sea, whereas reason seeks to cross the infinite sea and to make it finite.

When being a fool involves humiliation, a holy fool doesn’t mind that either. As the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno wrote in his journal when he was realizing that learning was not the way to God, “One must seek for the truth of things, not their reason, and truth is sought in humility.”⁷ Perhaps only a Christian would be able to appreciate this fully, since Christians have as their prime example a God who emptied and then further humbled himself.

Even so, other traditions have holy fools too. Hindu religious men in India often leave behind careers late in life to become what is called a *sadhu*, devoted to asceticism and wandering. The young look to them as spiritual teachers. In Buddhism, holy lunacy often exhibits itself in laughter—deep, belly laughter! The notion is that only the person who has abandoned worldly cares and drunk deeply in the spiritual life is able to laugh in such a genuine way. The Laughing Buddha of Buddhist lore goes from town to town spreading joy and happiness.

Not so for Francis. He didn’t like laughter because in the milieu of late medieval Europe, laughter closely resembled frivolity. A *Mirror of Perfection*, an early account of Francis’s life and teachings, tells of him

teaching the importance of being joyful, but then adding that he wouldn't want "this joy to be shown through laughter or even empty words. . . . [H]e abhorred laughter and an idle word to an exceptional degree. . . . By a joyful face he understood the fervor and solicitude, the disposition and readiness of a mind and body to willingly undertake every good work."⁸ At its root, this shows that Christian holy foolery has always had an important purpose.

We can't get away from the fact that our inspiration comes first and foremost from the example of Jesus during his Passion. He was willingly mocked and humiliated on his way to the cross. He could have arranged things differently. Why did he allow the stripping off of his clothes, the scourging, being made fun of by the Roman soldiers, and the jeering of the crowds? He was a fool to make a point about humility. In the process, he demonstrated how like us he is. We easily feel foolish, and spend so much time trying to avoid the experience. This is why a holy fool is taught, today, to actually seek out humiliating moments as a kind of exercise, in order to teach us the kind of wisdom that comes only from overcoming the all-too-present self. (See, for example, the stories "Juniper Went Naked," and "When Juniper Set Out to Be Mocked" in chapter 5.) Today, this is the rarest kind of Christian foolery, and a type of spiritual practice that I hope may be revived at least a bit with the encouragement found in this book.



The purpose of *The Holy Fool's Prayer Book* is to encourage us to be fools for Christ and provide some resources by which to do it. Let our words and actions run counter to what society expects, because in so doing, we might be most faithfully living the Gospel.

You'll encounter plenty of Scripture to keep you focused, some of which I've already mentioned. There are passages from the Gospels, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and from St. Paul, who wrote a lot in defense of foolishness in one of his most popular letters, First Corinthians. You will encounter these teachings in the week's worth of prayer and inspiration, "Seven Themes for Seven Days," below.

As you go, now, keep in mind that, for people like Francis and Juniper, being a holy fool is often not just a way of discipleship but an act of protest. They wanted people to see the truth, and sometimes we wear such thick blinders that we need to be shocked in order to see through them. Being a fool can be a way of finding a new source of confidence, away from what the world offers and values, in priorities that are known primarily to others who share in the foolishness. Kahlil Gibran expresses this in an early work when he writes, "I have found both freedom and safety in my madness; the freedom of loneliness and the safety from being understood, for those who understand us enslave something in us."⁹ May this book, in some small measure, set you free.

I

LOOKING TO ST. FRANCIS
AND BROTHER JUNIPER *for*
INSPIRATION

Then he entered into the city of Assisi and began, as though drunk with the Holy Spirit, to praise God aloud in the streets and the squares.” That is how the first-ever biography of Francis relays one of the saint’s earliest public expressions of faith. The author who wrote that account, Thomas of Celano, knew Francis personally. The analogy to drunkenness—public drunkenness, no less!—was clearly deliberate. That’s what many thought of Francis in those early days.

He wasn’t drunk on alcohol, of course. But to extend the metaphor: he was tipsy, light-headed, even to the extent of being louder in public than is usually deemed appropriate. He wasn’t acting like he was drunk; he was praising God aloud “as though drunk.” There’s a difference.

A holy fool *does* sometimes act a part. He will pretend to be something that he isn’t in order to make a point, or to get a message across. For example, this is what Brother Bernard did only a few years later, when he went to Bologna and sat in the piazza all day, for days on end, looking like what soon came to be known as a Franciscan fool: unshaven, filthy, patches on his clothing, an incongruous smile on his face. “Who are you? Why are you here?” someone finally asked Bernard. Which is when he pulled from his pocket the radically simple rule of life that he and the first Franciscans lived by, and shared it with them. Within days there were novice friars in Bologna.

Brother Juniper did the same thing, over and over—allowing himself to be poked fun of, even

deliberately humiliating himself, in order to express the spirit of his faith and commitments. There was the time, for instance, when Juniper wanted to make himself a laughing stock before others and stripped himself of all but his underwear (yes, this is something of a recurring theme!), and carried a bundle of his habit and other clothes into the city of Viterbo—half-naked, right into the marketplace. This story is told in full in chapter 5, below. Many youths came by and believed that Juniper had lost his senses. They threw stones and mud at him and pushed him around, spitting words of insult. But Juniper stayed there most of that day, enduring it happily. As the day was coming to a close, he then went to sleep at the convent nearby.

When the other friars saw what he'd done, they were angry. One said, "Let's lock him up." Another, "He deserves worse than that!" And another, "He's caused a scandal to the whole Order." But Juniper with joy answered, "I deserve all these punishments, and far worse."¹⁰ Such a response surely made the others pause.

But before this contrived foolery could take place, there was the unpretending kind—the drunk with the Spirit kind:

It was in the days when Francis was still wearing his secular clothing, even though he had begun to renounce the things of the world. He had been going around Assisi looking mortified and unkempt, wearing his penance in his appearance

in such a way that people thought he had become a fool. He was mocked and laughed at, and pelted with stones and mud by both those who knew him and those who did not. But Francis endured these things with patience and joy, as if he did not hear the taunts at all and had no means of responding to them.¹¹

Somewhere between these two kinds of prayerful foolishness comes the ability to laugh at the world when it places value on what is really without meaning.



St. Francis wasn't always a saint or a holy fool. Quite the opposite, in fact.

In this description of Francis before his conversion began, Thomas of Celano didn't mean the last part as praise: "Almost up to the twenty-fifth year of his age, he squandered and wasted his time miserably. Indeed, he outdid all his contemporaries in vanities and he came to be a promoter of evil and was more abundantly zealous for all kinds of foolishness."¹² But it was soon after his twenty-fifth year that God took hold of Francis's life and Francis began to seek more important things.

Quickly, in a matter of a few years, Francis and the first friends who joined him in the new charism that came to be called Franciscan—men like Brother Bernard and Brother Juniper—came to represent

the most important moment for holy foolishness in the history of the Christian West. Together they created a renaissance of this unique way of living and communicating the Gospel. Through them, faith was invigorated with innocence and simplicity. Clericalism, dogmatism, and crusading had dominated the Church for centuries, but soon gave way and were transformed.

Other religious orders at that time were focusing on theological teaching and doctrinal preaching. Francis, Juniper, and the others had a different sort of mission. They wanted to be, for lack of a better word, simple.

Innocence is vastly underrated today. Francis possessed it without even knowing that he did. That's of course the whole idea. I can't read these lines from *Don Quixote* without thinking again of the earnest young Francis: "His armor being now furbished, his helmet made perfect, his horse and himself provided with names, he found nothing wanting but a lady to be in love with."¹³ Cervantes is referring to his knight-errant hero, but it might as well again be Francis, who walked just as boldly and foolishly on the uncertain path that was his early conversion. For Francis, that lady soon became "Lady Poverty," to whom he quixotically devoted his entire life and then told his friends all about it.

"What woman are you thinking about, Francis?" his old friends asked him one day, expecting the day-dreaming or vain friend of their youth to answer. He shocked them when he replied:

“You are right! I was thinking about taking a wife more noble, wealthier, and more beautiful than you have ever seen.” They laughed at him. For he said this not of his own accord, but because he was inspired by God. In fact, the bride was the true religion that he later embraced, a bride more noble, richer and more beautiful because of her poverty.¹⁴

It was early on that Juniper joined Francis, and Juniper possessed a kind of innocence that might even have been greater than the founder’s. It often seemed that Juniper could see nothing but the ideals and goals of Christian life. Charity, for instance, led him to forget himself, and he was often rebuked, even by Francis, for running around without clothes on, since he’d given them all away. Humility was so much his focus that he often appeared ridiculous before others, to the point that his brother friars were embarrassed about him, as we’ve seen. “I wish that I had a whole forest of such Junipers!” Francis once punned, when confronted with this, clearly taking the opposite view.

Like all the holy fools in Christian history, both Francis and Juniper were possessed with a different way of looking at the world. They were influenced by the Holy Spirit in such a way that one might say they actually saw a different world from other people. Pouring rain, for instance, not only didn’t deter Francis when he was walking one day with Brother Leo, another early friend and companion,

on the road, but became something that he genuinely (and annoyingly, to Leo!) wanted to experience fresh and anew. With a similar conversion of the senses, Francis once praised Juniper, who was cooking for his brother friars, for his ability to turn garlic into lavender. Contemporary Franciscan Fr. Murray Bodo has recently imagined Juniper's response to this as, "I never thought of it before, but it is true. I often used to smell lavender when the brothers would bring home scraps they had begged."¹⁵ Most anyone else would have smelled something else entirely.

They were foolish in another important respect, as well. They lived without certainties that most people take for granted. This is because they wanted to follow their Savior who said, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk. 9:58). So Francis and Juniper didn't want homes or a secure future or even roofs over their heads. This is how holy foolishness can sometimes involve seeking "the peace of wild things," as it was recently stated by the poet and farmer Wendell Berry.

Unpredictability becomes a virtue for the Franciscan holy fool, since there is a grace and freedom in the created, wild world that human-made institutions and structures just can't quite match. "O Lord, how manifold are your works! in wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures," as the psalmist says (Ps. 104:25). In fact, pausing to notice or enjoy these things becomes more foolish all the time. Just imagine the man who talks

to animals as if they were his brothers and sisters, or a woman who gathers wild, free-ranging dandelions and values them as the loveliest of flowers of spring. Francis of Assisi threw himself in the snow, preached to birds, walked carefully over stones, and refused most everyday comforts. He was probably the freest man the world has ever known.



The Sufi poet Rumi once told a story of a man who was confronted by a police officer. The cop believed he was drunk. The man was asleep, leaning up against a wall in town when the officer approached and asked what he'd been drinking. "Whatever was in this bottle," the man responded. "What was that, exactly?" said the cop. "That which now fills me," said the accused. "Come on!" exclaims the officer, becoming upset. The officer was, Rumi used to explain, "like a donkey stuck in the mud."¹⁶ "You can't see what intoxicates me," the man finally replied. That's the holy in holy foolery. "And if I were still unhappy and reasoning perfectly, I'd be sitting upright and lecturing with the sheikhs," he added. That's the foolery—and how its wisdom penetrates the cloudiness of everyday life.

For eight hundred years there has been a way of prayer that's deeply rooted in the teachings of Christ but practiced mostly outside the walls of a church. To practice one's faith with foolishness in the ways that are particularly Franciscan is a spiritual gift (not so

much a practice, but a gift.) It didn't originate with the life and teachings of Francis of Assisi and Brother Juniper—holy fools trace their spiritual practice at least back to Christ—but it was galvanized in their unique lives, in their particular time and place.

They discovered a life of joy, simplicity, and wonder. Their gift for expressing God's joy and love involved being small not strong, avoiding positions of power altogether, thinking not about results but about virtue, and enjoying rather than avoiding moments of insecurity, fear, and awkwardness. These practices for being foolish in the eyes of the world were, for them, a sure way to discover the presence of God. That is what is available to anyone who chooses to walk the path of the Gospel in these countercultural ways.

Don't get me wrong: The holy fool's way is too radical for most people. It is for the few, not the many. When the famous Renaissance monk Erasmus wrote his satirical *In Praise of Folly*, he didn't recommend anything like what Francis, Juniper, and their friends lived out. By Erasmus's time, there was no one more arrogant in the Church than the mendicant orders, including the Franciscans, and they had largely exchanged their founding values and spiritual practices for others that were more in keeping with the values of the world. Erasmus ripped them apart, exposing their hypocrisies.

A holy fool's ways also aren't easy. But in their foolishness, Francis and Juniper remind anyone of what is the heart and soul of Jesus's teaching. You can't learn the Gospel simply in books. You have to

put these things into practice. But I think you will find, maybe to your great surprise, that this foolish way makes great sense, especially today, as a corrective to what we know as twenty-first-century Christianity.

II
HOW FOOLS
MIGHT PRAY
—AT LEAST FOR A WEEK

A holy fool prays, probably more than most people, because she knows how much she is in need of what prayer accomplishes.

There is very little by way of speculative theology in fools' prayer. That's not the purpose of it. Instead, prayer is for praise, relationship, gratitude, even celebrating the paradoxes and mysteries of faith. Prayer is for thanking God and aligning the heart more with God's desires.

Mornings and evenings are good times to pray, or to practice praying—the two can be one and the same. Both mornings and evenings are times to mark the beginning of what is new. In the morning, these lines from William Blake (which also beautifully recall how heaven and earth are inextricably linked) are worth remembering:

Awake the dawn that sleeps in heaven; let light
Rise from the chambers of the east, and bring
The honied dew that cometh on waking day.

There are fresh possibilities as we thank God for eyes and hearts that open with the rising sun. The day has come around again.

Evenings are different. Each evening we have the emotions of the day and usually the exhaustion, too, to bring to a close. We do this with remembering praise and by expressing desires for the morrow. We also recall what has just happened; perhaps we ask forgiveness for what we've done or not done. And often we ask, with saints throughout the centuries,

for the Lord to protect us through the silent hours of the night.

This is what we'll do for a practice week.

WHAT TO EXPECT EACH DAY

The sequence for each day of this special morning and evening liturgy is as follows:

- A. PREPARATION (a very simple prayer of intention)
- B. THE WORD OF GOD—usually a Gospel sentence or other line from the New Testament that is pungent with the theme of the day. The same one is used for both morning and evening each day. The brevity of these passages can be profound—and encourage memorization.
- C. SILENCE (more than a moment; take a minute or more if you can)
- D. SONG OF MY SOUL (the psalm selection)
- E. A READING FROM THE PROPHETS (a canticle from the Hebrew prophets)
- F. NEW TESTAMENT READING
- G. SILENCE (again)
- H. AN EARLY FRANCISCAN SAYING
- I. A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE (this is where the praying meets the living)

There are many ways that you may choose to use these morning and evening prayers in your life. They can function as a special energizer of prayer in your

devotional life. Prayer needs sparks in order to keep firing. As you walk along with Francis and Juniper and pray the themes that formed their spiritual lives, you will reinvigorate your own.

First, if you already have a prayer book you use daily, there are ways to pray this book as a supplement to your usual practice. Perhaps you wish to focus your prayer time with Francis and Juniper on a special weekend or a week-long spiritual retreat on holy foolery or a broader Franciscan theme.

The divine hours of prayer have, from their earliest beginnings in the ancient synagogue, been intended for group use; so, you may wish, in addition, to pray these short liturgies together with others in a group devoted to learning more about Francis of Assisi, Brother Juniper, and the charism of early Franciscanism. Otherwise, as you pray alone, know that you are not alone. You join with thousands of others around the world both past and present who have prayed similar words, as well. For them and for us, daily prayer is a means of beginning anew each day.

Second, if you already have a prayer practice and a prayer book, this book's offering of a week of prayers may be a temporary substitute for your regular prayer practice. You may wish to make a special prayer week, finding some fresh inspiration by praying, exploring, and living into the themes of the holy fool. It is natural to come to these points in any prayer life, when something new is needed, which explains the necessity of works such as this one.

Third, while I hope that these prayers become a personal and daily prayer book for many, it may also appeal to those who may wish to pray in community, in study groups, or even academic settings. There is no way to really understand the “poor followers” of Christ, as Francis and Juniper referred to themselves, without enjoining their spiritual lives, its themes, and the very words of their prayers.

SEVEN THEMES FOR SEVEN DAYS

We will begin with seven themes—one per day—that emerge from the life and writings of and about St. Francis and Brother Juniper. These themes will provide a framework and subject for each of our seven days of prayer.

Day One—There Is Wisdom in Foolishness (Sunday)

Again, to quote William Blake (he was a holy fool), “If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise.” In other words, as in every aspect of the Christian life, there is telos to what we do and who we are. Telos is a Greek word used by Aristotle as well as by St. Paul. It means purpose, goal. Know this right here and now before you go any further: fools are fools not only because it is the way to follow Christ, but because it is the way to truth. The world can see a holy fool only as a tragic figure, crushed despite his goodness, but we know differently. The fool’s way is the way to a blessed future as he or she is

slowly becoming what has been promised and what we yearn for:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isa. 2:2–4).

Day Two—There Is Strength in Powerlessness (Monday)

Essential to any spiritual practice of holy foolishness is acknowledging that the only lasting power and strength in the world and in our lives rests in God—the God who came as a baby in a manger. Is there any greater example of powerlessness than the human infant? Of all the ways for God to enter the world, that is the one God chose, demonstrating the theme for this day: There is strength in powerlessness. The theme is emphasized in the readings from the Gospels, showing that there is no greater holy fool

than Jesus himself, and that there are reasons why, not just the birth of Jesus, but his Passion, too, provide the ultimate example for our lives.

Day Three—There Is Joy in Forgiveness (Tuesday)

Holy foolishness cannot exist without a profound and radical sense of forgiveness in our lives—a true “letting go.” This becomes a sense of relief that is sometimes powerfully experienced with tears and dancing and shouting when you repent of your sins. As one contemporary author who studied holy fools has cleverly put it, “As I continued to meet holy fools, I noticed that they viewed repentance as the essential curriculum for spiritual kindergarten, college, and postdoctoral studies.”¹⁷ Allow yourself to be open to experiences and emotions such as these on day three; they are familiar to holy fools of all Christian traditions. As St. Antony of Egypt once said: “Here comes the time when people will behave like madmen, and if they see anybody who does not behave like that, they will rebel against him and say: ‘You are mad’—because he is not like them.”

Day Four—The Humble Are Blessed (Wednesday)

In the Gospels, several of the Beatitudes are teachings of Jesus that we don’t—*can we admit this?*—readily or easily believe. I’m talking about “blessed are the meek,” etc. We think of them as somewhat irrelevant to daily life in the real world, or as something for a future age when the world has changed from what it is. But when St. Paul says, “The

message of the cross is folly for those who are on the way to ruin, but for those of us who are on the road to salvation it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18), he's making a point about what is real. It turns out that much of that "real world" stuff that we've been told we should preoccupy ourselves with, is not, in fact, real at all. This is a day to pray on this theme, and seek to create in our lives the absence of vanity and egotism that otherwise fills most of everyday life around us.

Day Five—The Pure in Heart Are Blessed (Thursday)

This day is all about treasuring what is foolish because now we accept and realize that the fool is one who has come to see life as it really is. A fool is able to live life to the fullest because of what she understands, and who she is becoming. No longer is human existence all about surviving or competition, we realize. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche grew to hate Christianity and what it taught when he fashioned ideas of the superman and will to power. He couldn't stand the Christian's willingness to be weak. He found it pitiable, not something to be imitated. But Nietzsche was wrong. The saints are right. As the Bible says, Christ "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7) for our sake. That's our model, and that's what we try to do, in following him.

Along the way, we avoid self-delusion and chasing after things (stuff, people, love, reputation, fame)—these efforts that fill the will-to-have, will-to-be, and any other process by which people are taught to self-

fulfill. The holy fool knows life more simply, closer to its real essence, and, as a result, more beautifully. One contemporary author sums this up nicely when she imagines the people who don't get it: "How foolish to be an unholy fool!"¹⁸

*Day Six—Folly Is another Name for Righteousness
(Friday)*

Why is this theme essential? Because spiritual practice is never something we do just for us, in the quiet of our house or room. Our lives are inextricably intertwined with the lives of others anyway, but we also are supposed to deliberately connect them, and help each other. Even (or especially!) holy foolishness can help the people around us.

Why is folly another name for righteousness? Because it is foolish in the eyes of the world to do what brings us no earthly reward. It is crazy to spend time and focus energy on what brings us no glory. That's because the world assigns meaning to what the holy fool knows is without meaning. This is when what we do begins to resemble art—with unexpected revelations of beauty, new perceptions of what's real. As Thomas Merton once appreciated in the playwright Eugene Ionesco, "If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art."¹⁹ And as St. Paul once said: "Since in the wisdom of God the world was unable to recognize God through wisdom, it was God's own pleasure to save believers through the folly of the gospel" (1 Cor. 1:21).

Day Seven—True Wisdom Brings Peace and Justice
(Saturday)

This is a tough one, and that's why it comes last. It is difficult because a holy fool tries never to be self-righteous. Concerns for self undermine anything else that a holy fool might do. Still, a holy fool is often a kind of prophet, and deliberately so—so the line is a narrow one to walk. As you grow in wisdom, remember the Book of Wisdom and how the people complain about the “righteous man”: “Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord” (Wisd. 2:12). The righteous one is not wrong—doing what is right even when it's uncomfortable is the epitome of holy foolishness. We have to remember who we are serving. Also, a holy fool knows the truth of what poet Wendell Berry has recently said: “A change of heart or of values without a practice is only another pointless luxury of a passively consumptive way of life.”²⁰