

Francis of Assisi, Brother of Creation

1. A LIFE-AFFIRMING RESPONSE

There are inspired gestures that are binding. Francis made one such gesture when, in front of his fellow citizens in Assisi, he said: "I will know no other Father than the one in heaven. "

The words of the Master to the rich young man in the Gospel echoed in him: "Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor; THEN COME AND FOLLOW ME".

Yes, the only way to become a disciple of the One who wanted to remain on earth as the poorest of men, is to obey His word to the young man: to sacrifice everything, to abandon everything, a heroic gesture that he did not know how to make.

Francis, on the other hand, already understood that his mission was to be poor following the greatest of the poor. All his life he taught his brothers, in order to be free, to refuse to possess even the least of earthly goods, because otherwise we are possessed by them.

This is a difficult undertaking, but a necessary one, because it involves the whole of our lives. To a Church that temporal riches threaten to ruin, the young convert of Assisi offered salvation by recalling this hardest of all evangelical truths:

"SEEK FIRST THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS; THE REST WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU.

Poverty, total renunciation, the free deprivation of all possessions will become for him the means of high holiness with the hunger for God and his Love.

A sublime school that Francis opened to men who are always in danger of falling into the slavery of the devouring desire for gold!

A school of faith in Providence which infallibly gives **"THE SURPLUS"**.

A school of serenity and peace for humanity always tempted by selfishness and greed, the source of wars!



2. THE TROUBADOUR OF GOD. THE POET OF CREATION

Francis had inherited from his mother an innate and fruitful vocation for poetry and music.

In his early youth he invited those trouvères who came from France and sang the joys of love and the beauty of the world. Now he went beyond them all, for with a new spirit he broadened and deepened his vision of God and the created. His soul, full of feeling, opened up to the pure and untouched forces of nature, as Adam once did in the splendour of the earthly Paradise.

His lively faith made all creatures transparent and through them he saw the power, beauty and goodness of God. His "Creed" was not reduced, as it was for many of his contemporaries, to dry formulas of faith, to arid dogma, to harsh commandments; it was made up of joyful fervour in a delicious innocence all radiant with grace.

THE WHOLE GREATNESS AND BEAUTY OF CREATION WAS SPREAD BEFORE HIS EYES IN A MARVELLOUS SYMPHONY ALL SUFFUSED WITH GRACE.

Like the first man, innocent, he was the interpreter of Creation, the king of the created who sings to the Creator the praises of all creatures.

The wind, the fire, the moon, the earth, and even death had become his brothers and sisters; the swallows and larks obeyed his orders, and the fierce wolves kindly offered him their paws.

Through Francis, who became the model of Christ's disciples, a new song, pure and ineffable, was introduced into the great symphony of Christianity.

3. CHILDREN OF THE AIR, BLESS THE LORD

One day, the poor boy was on his way to Bevagna; he had passed the village of Cannara, when he saw on the nearby hillside a multitude of birds of all kinds and colours, which seemed to have gathered there for something extraordinary. Francis, who loved them so much, left his companions on the road, saying to them: "Wait for me a moment, I am going to see our brothers the birds and ask them what they are doing there".

When he came among them, he said to them in a friendly manner: "My brothers the birds, praise and bless the Lord, love him and serve him with joy; give him great thanks: for he gives you this beautiful plumage to cover you, wings to fly and keep you in the clear air. You do not sow, you do not reap, and yet he gives you all that is necessary for life.

At these words, the birds, in their own way, gave signs of exultation; Francis, happy to be among them, went back and forth among the birds, touching their bodies and their little heads with his tunic. They fluttered around him, then chirped and returned to their nest.

This episode is an impressive reminder to man to praise God, to bless Him who is the Giver of all good; it is also an exhortation to trust fully in divine Providence. Nothing can resist the omnipotence of God!

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4. THE LIBERATED TURTLE-DOVES

Francis poured out his love and joy on all creatures; for all of them he felt a true brotherhood, a constant tenderness, which brought him joys, but also sufferings.

One day, on a country path, he met a boy carrying turtledoves in a cage. Francis thought that they were to be sold and then killed; he felt great compassion for them. My boy," he said, "will you give them to me? In Sacred Scripture, these gentle birds are compared to chaste and faithful souls; they must not fall into cruel hands that will kill them".

The saint was astonished and looked at him; then, overcome by the sweetness of these words, offered them to him spontaneously.

The Saint was very pleased and, having taken them, gently warned them: "Oh, my little turtledove sisters, simple and innocent, why did you let yourselves be taken? I want to take you from death; I want to make a nest for you, so that you may multiply, as the Creator has commanded. He thanked the boy and then took them to Saint Mary of the Angels, where he made them a nest and set them free.

Another fact is worth reporting. A good peasant, on the occasion of Easter, gave Francis a lamb which he liked.

Francis a lamb which pleased him, especially because it reminded him of Jesus, the Lamb of God who sacrificed himself for the salvation of men. And the lamb followed him everywhere, obeying him like an intelligent being; it even joined devoutly in the prayers of Brother Francis and his companions. These facts invite us to see, as he did, in creations, a ray, a reflection, an image of the beauty and goodness of God.

5. THE PEACEMAKER

One day Francis arrived in the city of Gubbio and learned that the population was living in fear: a large wolf was circling the area and devouring animals and even men.

Inspired by the Lord, he felt compassion for the poor people and decided to go alone and without weapons to confront the terrible animal. When he met it, he made the sign of the Cross, and holding out his hands, he said to it: "Brother wolf, come here; on behalf of Christ, I command you not to harm me or others.

Immediately the wolf came to him. The crowd through the foliage watched him and held their breath, saw Francis leaning towards the beast and heard him speak to him: "Brother wolf, everywhere you have done much harm, assaulting the Lord's creatures, even men, made in the image of God. You deserve the fork as a thief and murderer. The people cry out against you and look upon you as an enemy. But, brother wolf, I want peace between you and the people. As if he had understood these words, the wolf inclined his head and wagged his tail in joy, showing that he accepted the proposal.

Francis then wanted to clarify this commitment and added: "Brother wolf, since you are willing to make peace, I promise you that the inhabitants will give you your daily food until you die, so that you will no longer suffer from hunger. Then the wolf, standing on his feet, raised his front paw and, as a sign of agreement, placed it in the hand of the Saint, who happily and smilingly shook it to the great amazement of the crowd. And from that day on, the tamed wolf entered the houses where it was fed abundantly.

6. THE GRECCIO NATIVITY SCENE

It was the year 1223. Christmas was approaching, and already the pastoral canticles of the musette players could be heard. The tender love with which Francis loved Jesus inspired him with a wonderful idea. He called John of Velita, a rich man and fervent tertiary, and said to him: "I would like to relive that heavenly night, to see with my own eyes how Jesus, in Bethlehem, was born as a child, poor and miserable for love of us. Go to Greccio, look for a suitable cave in the woods and rocks; put up a cot with straw, bring an ox and a donkey. Together with the brothers and the people we will celebrate the coming of the Son of God on earth". From the heart of Francis, burning with love for Christ, was born the rite of the Crib which every year moves us, making us relive the mystery of love of Christmas.

It was with great enthusiasm that everything was prepared for this Holy Night. The friars from the various surrounding hermitages surrounded the grotto with a lighted candle in their hands. They were joined by men and women from the surrounding villages.

At midnight, Mass began; Francis acted as deacon, sang the Gospel, and then in a gentle voice spoke of the great mystery of the Saviour's birth.

When he placed the doll representing a child in the cot, everyone was ecstatic to see the doll come to life and move as if it were alive.

Jesus had wanted to reward the burning love of Francis, whose institution of the Crib would enchant millions of children every year and melt the ice of indifference in millions of hearts.



Source : TURETTA, Valentino. (1977). *SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI*, Santuario Porziuncola, Assisi.