

April 2011: Four Franciscan Reflections

What I offer here are four Franciscan lessons that seem relevant to our mission as Christians more generally. But first, a bit about Francis for those of you who don't know him. Francis was born around AD 1181 in Assisi, the son of a rich cloth merchant. In his youth he was something of a party animal, the prince of the feast. He went to war, hoping to win honor for himself. Instead, imprisonment and sickness left him broken and without direction. Through confrontations with lepers, with dreams, and with Christ himself (through a crucifix), Francis experienced a radical conversion to Christ. In 1206 he left all his possessions behind and began repairing local sanctuaries, and then preaching. In time a few of his friends in Assisi abandoned their careers and followed Francis. They received papal approval as an Order in 1210. By 1220 the Franciscan Order had thousands of members. After Francis' death in 1226, the Franciscan Order became the most influential religious community of the Middle Ages. One of his followers, Clare of Assisi, was the first woman to compose a Rule of life for the Order of women who followed Francis. There have been perhaps more biographies written of Francis than anyone else. He is ranked among the 50 most influential people in the past 1,000 years. I could go on and on. So here are my four lessons.

1. Christian mission is about apostolic lifestyle

If we are to learn about Christian mission Franciscan-style we should probably begin with the story of Francis' call to preach. Francis was repairing church buildings around 1207 and one day heard the Gospel read. Asking for clarification, he learned that Jesus' followers went about preaching repentance without shoes or staff or purse for money, limiting themselves to one tunic. Thomas of Celano (Francis' first biographer) writes of Francis' response, that he "immediately put off his shoes from his feet, put aside the staff from his hands, was content with one tunic, and exchanged his leather girdle for a small cord. . . . From then on he began to preach penance to all with great fervor of spirit and joy of mind" (*First Life*, chap. IX, X).

Now there are two things to notice here. The first is, of course, that Francis' ministry was *apostolic*. He was an evangelist and founder of what became the most influential missionary movement of the Middle Ages. Whereas other religious reform efforts focused attention on the cathedral or the monastery, Francis pioneered itinerant missions. As soon as he had a cadre of disciples and official permission he sent his followers caring for lepers, working or begging for their money, and especially preaching in the villages. While most of Europe was mobilizing for war against the Muslim threat, Francis risked his life to travel to Egypt and meet with the Sultan personally, trying to persuade him to become a Christian. Francis was a missionary.

But there is something else to notice in this story, and in Francis' life. The point for Francis was not really accomplishing a mission, but rather living a *lifestyle*. More specifically, Francis wanted to imitate Jesus. There is another story of Francis and a few of his followers who open the Gospel three times. They read "sell what you possess, give to the poor and come, follow"; "take nothing for your journey"; "let him deny himself and take up his cross." Francis, after hearing these words, cries out, "Here is your life, here is the counsel Christ gives us, here is our rule and the rule of all who would come after us." Christian mission for Francis was simply living the life of Jesus and his early followers. The Franciscan approach to poverty, to education, to community government, and much more are all rooted in this desire to live as Jesus lived. Whereas the early Dominicans (the other primary missionary Order in Francis' day) emphasized the *apostolic*, making decisions based on missionary function, for Francis the emphasis is on the *life*.

So ask: "What is mission to me?" How does my lifestyle proclaim the Gospel?" There is a saying attributed to Francis, "Preach the Gospel, and when necessary use words."

2. Christian mission requires prayer

What is less known about Francis is that he spent a great deal of time in prayer. The earliest documents describe every early Franciscan settlement as a "hermitage." We can visit many of these sites today. One of the few documents Francis wrote was a brief set of instructions for brothers who wished to live for extended periods of time in a hermitage. The early biographies of Francis describe his followers residing in hermitages to observe a "Lent." If all of these "Lents" in a given year were added up, calculates historian William Short, "nearly two-thirds of it would be spent in fasting and prayer, quite likely in the hermitages." There were also daily rhythms of mission and contemplation in Franciscan life. As Bishop Jacques de Vitry commented in 1216, "During the day they go into the cities and villages giving themselves over to the active life in order to gain others; at night, however, they return to their hermitage or solitary places to devote themselves to contemplation." From 1221 on Francis retired more and more from active ministry, and even more in the last two years of his life (1224-1226). After his death a number of Francis' followers made a special emphasis on the life of poverty and contemplation, living in the hermitages around Assisi.

Jesus made a habit of withdrawing for times of prayer. Once again, Francis sought to imitate the life of Christ. It has only been in the past few decades that Franciscans themselves have begun to recover this lost aspect of their own heritage. Nonetheless, the contemplative life is central in Franciscan heritage and its practice is the subject of some recovery. We could do well to follow suit. So ask: "How can I make a habit of withdrawing in the midst of my active life?"

3. Christian mission requires the formation of a family

When I take a lump of clay and shape it into a bowl, I am "forming" it, exerting a little influence so that it might ultimately look and function in a certain way. By the work of the Spirit we, too, are formed to look and function in a certain way. Paul calls the Galatians his "little children" confessing that for them "I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). Monastic Orders have long talked about the importance of the formation of their members. Evangelical mission organizations and congregations are becoming aware of this need. What can we learn about this process of formation from the Franciscans?

First, Franciscan formation is intentional. I was talking with a Franciscan priest the in the midst of my studies and he commented that had the Roman Catholic church been more intentional about formation thirty years ago, they would not be dealing with sexual scandals today. The Catholic church states in their official *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*: "The proper renewal of religious institutes depends chiefly on the formation of their members" (#1). The Franciscans require their members to maintain key relationships and key practices that might foster their personal and spiritual maturity. We could learn from this. Just as Paul was intentional in his efforts to help the Galatians become formed in Christ, so we must take steps to grow in Christ. So ask: "What intentional steps can I take?"

Second, Franciscan formation is holistic. Thus, as the foundational document on Franciscan formation (the *Ratio Formationis Franciscanae*), states, "It also seems evident that such a path [the formative process] must endure for a lifetime and involve the *whole* person, heart, mind, and strength." Franciscans speak of being formed as *humans*, as *Christians*, and as *Franciscans* (see their *General*

Constitutions, chapter 6, Article 127.1). God desires that we mature in all of our life, and a healthy ministry demands that we learn not only about evangelism or doctrine or prayer, but also about ordinary interpersonal skills (like taking correction and sharing chores). All of this and more are part of a holistic formation process. Again, what steps could you take (in partnership with others) to facilitate maturity in your heart, in your mind, and in your strength in the Lord?

Nevertheless, Franciscan formation is not rigid. Indeed, a third feature of Franciscan formation is that it is flexible. The very name of the primary Franciscan Order is called the Order of Friars Minor. Literally, they are "little brothers," and this humble family spirit characterizes their approach to everything, formation included. Franciscans are very shy of anything that looks like a cookie-cutter procedure. Simple "hanging out," on-the-job (on-the-street) training, informal reading, and key relationships all play a part in Franciscan formation. And all of the techniques of formation are subject to the personality and needs of the person being formed. Our programs must be at the service of our people. So ask: "How might my own formation be tailored to my own needs and personality?"

4. Christian mission is summed up in simple obedience

A number of years ago I was sitting in our worship service on All Saints Sunday. Our pastor gave a sermon on how all of us were saints: we are holy people, we encourage one another in the faith, and we model the Christ-like life for each other. At the end of the sermon he asked us to voice out loud one or two names of those who were "saints" for us. I immediately said "Francis." This was a surprise to me in that it had been a long time since I had done any serious study of Francis. And yet I knew-- Francis had modeled the simple obedience of a Christ-follower such as no one else in my life.

The story of Francis' 1206 encounter with the cross at San Damiano illustrates this. Francis has begun to convert to Christ. He has returned home from his chivalrous adventures (in obedience to a dream). He has reached out to the leper. One day he wanders by the church of St. Damian and is led by the Spirit to enter. As he is worshiping before the crucifix, he hears these words, "Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is falling in ruin." Thomas of Celano documents Francis' response to the command of the crucified Christ. "Right away he gave a certain priest some money that he might buy a lamp and oil, lest the sacred image should be deprived of the due honor of a light even for a moment. Then he diligently hastened to do the rest and devoted his untiring efforts toward repairing that church" (*Second Life*, chap. 6). Francis did not really "get it" at that point, namely that God wanted him to reform the larger Church of Christ. But that was not important. What was important was that God had spoken, and even if Francis did not quite get it right, his heart was toward simple obedience.

This kind of impulsive obedience characterized Francis throughout his life. He was not the best missionary strategist, nor the best administrator. Francis was obedient, abandoned in obedience to God. It is one thing to learn about Francis the missionary. We can talk about apostolic lifestyle and contemplative practice. We can create fancy programs of formation. But all this historical wisdom is worth nothing without the foundation of simple obedience. So I urge you, learn from Francis' obedience. Step out in obedience. Listen for the voice of God. And when you hear the voice of the Crucified One, simply obey, whether you "get it" or not. The world will be the better for your choice. So ask: "Where is the cutting edge of my obedience?"

For more on Francis and Franciscans, check out G. K. Chesterton's classic *Saint Francis of Assisi*, Julien Green's well-researched *The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*, Lawrence Cunningham and Dennis Stock's beautiful text-and-picture book *Saint Francis of Assisi*, the wonderful survey of Franciscan history in *The Franciscan Tradition* (edited by Regis Armstrong and Ingrid J. Peterson), and

the hot new novel by Ian Morgan Cron, *Chasing Francis: A Pilgrim's Tale*.