

Franciscan Spirituality
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Sister Anna Rose Kalinowski, FSE

St. Francis of Assisi is one of the most popular saints in the world. People of all religions seem to recognize and embrace him – even if it's only because he “loved animals.” Brother Masseo, one of Francis' companions, asked him once: “Why does everyone come to you? Why does the whole world run after you?” Francis' answer to this was “Because the eyes of God have not found a more vile sinner on earth than me.” But what Father Raniero Cantalamessa proposes instead is that the world “goes after Francis of Assisi not because he was a great sinner, but because it sees the values that everyone secretly aspires to be realized in him(self): peace, freedom, joy, universal brotherhood and harmony with the whole creation.”¹

What is that “secret” which Francis possessed? It was Jesus Christ! He had encountered Jesus in a very intimate way. And in his body, Francis “reminds the world of the humble and crucified Redeemer of whom he was a kind of living ‘icon.’”²

Who was Francis Bernardone? He was the son of a middle-class cloth merchant. As a young man, Francis was arrogant, the life of the party, a troubadour in his own right as he sang and told stories to his friends. But something was missing, and he could not figure it out.

In his dreams was a lady ... and it took years for him to discover Lady Poverty. He thought he was called to be a knight in the Crusades. But Francis was never built to fight in wars. For God was calling him to a higher good. He would fight in a different crusade, one in which he would help to reform the Church from the ground up. It was never his goal to create a following which would change the world. He just wanted to be close to Jesus, to know the great love which Jesus had for us in the suffering he bore for us on the cross. In the end he became an *alter Christus*, another Christ – for God marked him with the five wounds of Christ in his body, the stigmata, just two years before his death.

As a young man, Francis was repulsed by lepers. He did everything possible not to make contact with one. If he spotted one, he would go the long way around to avoid the leper. A huge

conversion point for him was when he had the courage to kiss a leper. As he states in his Testament written in 1226 not long before he died:

“When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me...”³

His conversion did not happen overnight. He spent much time in prayer, waiting on the Lord to reveal his real mission in life. It was in the church of San Damiano that God spoke to Francis from the crucifix, saying: “Francis, rebuild my church which you see is falling down around you.” Francis took this call literally. He rebuilt the church of San Damiano stone by stone. In fact, he rebuilt two other churches as well before he fully understood God’s call for his life.

You see – God’s call was to help to bring men back to him in the simplest of ways. God’s call was to show men how to pray once more, to help them to find Him in all of creation. In rebuilding the three churches stone by stone, people noticed this little man who was filled with joy begging for stones, begging for a crust of bread. They started to follow him, to listen to what he had to say. And by following God’s call for his life, Francis changed the world.

You have the opportunity to be a conversion point – in yourself and in others. When you come in contact with a patient, that patient is vulnerable. He or she comes to you looking for healing, looking for someone who will care for them, who will listen to them. They open up to you in a way in which they may not open up to another person, bringing to you their ailments, looking for healing, becoming vulnerable.

As physicians and those in the medical profession, you are called to touch others when they are the most vulnerable. That sense of human touch – the embrace of the leper – means more than you realize to that person. It can open up a new world. Your call is to healing, and that may be physical healing, mental healing, emotional healing, or even spiritual healing. Your bedside manner can make or break a patient.

Jesus was a physician. Think of his many ways of healing. His main goal was spiritual healing. The outward signs of his healing were physical, mental, and emotional. In most cases, this healing occurred through touch. Think of how he spit and touched the eyes of the blind man. Remember how he took the hand of the girl saying: “*Talitha cum*. Little girl, I say to you: Arise!” (Mk 5:42) We can pull out dozens of examples from the Gospels of the ways that Jesus healed, Jesus - the Divine Physician.

You are the extension of Christ's hands! Saint Teresa of Ávila said: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

St. Teresa of Ávila lived two centuries after St. Francis of Assisi. Yet this was the way in which Francis lived out his life. His life was an extension of the body of Christ reaching out to each person he met. He lived the Gospel in every way. And at the heart of it all was JOY. "Perfect joy" as Francis refers to it. This is what makes him such a magnet for all people – and in all times.

But what is this "perfect joy" which Francis possessed? As he journeyed with Brother Leo one day, he told him that this joy was not in being recognized by great theologians or having the king of France or England join the order, nor was it to convert all the unbelievers to the faith, or to heal the sick or raise the dead. No, perfect joy exists in this, he says:

"I am returning from Perugia, and I am coming here at night in the dark. It is winter time and wet and muddy and so cold that icicles form at the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs, and blood flows from such wounds. And I come to the gate, all covered with mud and cold and ice, and after I have knocked and called for a long time a friar comes and asks: 'Who are you?' I answer: 'Brother Francis.' And he says: 'Go away. You are a simple and uneducated fellow. From now on don't stay with us anymore. We are so many and so important that we don't need you.' But I still stand at the gate and say: 'For the love of God, let me come in tonight.' And he answers: 'I won't. Go to the Crosiers' Place and ask there.' I tell you that if I kept patience and was not upset – that is true joy and true virtue and the salvation of the soul." ⁴

Francis was referring to the Letter of St. James when he spoke of perfect joy:

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

James 1:2-4

Francis' life of joy was deeply rooted in the Scriptures. He associated this joy with the trials that produce perseverance, and perseverance completes God's work by drawing us into the truth of salvation. The "perfect joy" which Francis alludes to is a result of the gift of faith and hope. We must continually pray "Lord, increase our faith and our hope!" We must root ourselves in the Gospels and in the Eucharist, indeed, in all of the Sacraments so as to receive the graces to live this call.

By entering into the medical world as Catholic Christians, you have taken on a role of service. My hope is that you are living this call. In order to serve, one must first learn to put the *other* first. This is the definition of LOVE: “Willing the good of *the other*.”

Each one of you is a follower of Jesus Christ. When you follow someone, you take on the dust which he kicks up. The closer you follow, the dustier you get! As you follow, you watch him from behind and imitate what he does.

Our Master gave us an example of selfless living, serving others in love, sacrificing self – in order to redeem us and show us a better way. Father Cantalamessa shares that “in Christianity, self-denial is not an end in itself. Rather, it is the most perfect way of opening ourselves up to others and to God. In order to help others, we first of all need to die to ourselves. This is the way in which we incarnate the fundamental law of Christian sacrifice, in which the *recipient* of the sacrifice is God but the *beneficiary* is one’s neighbor. This parallels Christ’s handing himself over to the Father for us” (see Ephesians 5:2).⁵

Saint Francis remained poor all his life. He gave up all to follow God’s will for his life. In following the Crucified One, Francis was also stripped of all that held him back from truly living out his call. Gradually, God led him to a total gift of himself which allowed him to experience the gift of the cross – the stigmata which signed him and enabled him to say with Saint Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Each of us is faced with the inner struggle which leads us to total surrender. On that journey we may find an inner resistance which is afraid to embrace the weakness and the foolishness of the cross which Paul reminds us is the wisdom and the power of this world. The cross is not based on any human criteria – remember that God’s strength and wisdom are revealed to us through Jesus’ cross! Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini challenges us as followers of the Poor Crucified One to reflect on these questions:⁶

- What does it mean to live out my ministry (insert yours here!) as one who is *poor*? Do I seek strength and security in what I have, what I know, and who I am?
- The opposite of trust is a sort of restless tension in our lives that causes excessive unrest, anxiety, and fear. Do I experience this at times? When?
- Do I seek God’s will for my life and the lives of those under my care, both as a sign of self-deprivation and of self-renunciation? Where is the *cross* in my ministry?
- What kinds of resistance and what *worldly* logic do I see in myself most frequently? A longing to be successful? A search for approval? A lack of attention to the needs of others?

To find the “perfect joy” to which Francis alludes, we must remember that it is not rooted in the absence of difficulties and worries in one’s life. Francis surely had them – but he did not let these overwhelm him. His life was a journey of continual conversion of heart, something that we are all called to. Through this journey of conversion of heart, Francis continued to find peace and joy.

Peace and joy are the fruits of living out the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a profound experience of faith, and the gift of superabundant grace. In Francis’ journey of faith, he was able to experience peace and joy because he possessed a profound gift of *praise* and *gratitude*. Francis could place himself before God with an inner attitude of praise and gratitude. These are two of the most important principals of prayer.

I would imagine that you are familiar with Francis’ Canticle of Creatures. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has used some of these lines when he introduced his new encyclical *Laudato Si’*. This is how that Canticle begins:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, and the glory, and the honor, and all blessing,
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light...⁷

The Canticle continues to praise the Creator for all of the wonders of His creation.

Another prayer which came forth as the fruit of Francis’ experience of receiving the stigmata on La Verna was The Praises of God. In this prayer is revealed the heart of Francis and his inner relationship with God:

You are the holy Lord God Who does wonderful things.
You are strong. You are great. You are the most high.
You are the almighty king. You holy Father,
King of heaven and earth.
You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;
You are the good, all good, the highest good,
Lord God living and true.
You are love, charity; You are wisdom, You are humility,
You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness,

You are security, You are rest,
You are gladness and joy, You are our hope, You are justice,
You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.

You are beauty, You are meekness,
You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,
You are strength, You are refreshment. You are our hope,
You are our faith, You are our charity,
You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life:
Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior.⁸

We, too, are called to adopt gratitude as a spiritual attitude for our lives and in our mission of service to others. The proclamation of the Gospel through our words and actions are found in the deep experience of faith and joy which comes through a continued conversion of heart. Only praise and gratitude in your hearts can lead you in this service, allowing you an attitude of patience and compassion to those whom you serve. It is here you will find “perfect joy.”

Sister Anna Rose Kalinowski is a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist. She lives in Duluth, Minnesota and works as an Accountant and Parish Life Coordinator for St. Benedict's Parish in Duluth. The Motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist is located in Meriden, Connecticut. For more information, see their website at www.fsecommunity.org

¹ Father Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. CAP., *In Love with Christ: The secret of Saint Francis of Assisi*. ZENIT Books, 2014 Innovative Media Inc.

² Ibid.

³ “The Testament of St. Francis” (1226), quoted from Marion A. Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of Sources for the Life of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1983).

⁴ “The Perfect Joy,” Habig; see also “Little Flowers of St. Francis,” VIII, Habig.

⁵ Father Faniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. CAP. and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, *St. Francis and the Cross: Reflections on suffering, weakness, and joy*. St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Volume I of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, New City Press, 2001 Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY.

⁸ Ibid.