

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry Units are encouraged to distribute these articles.

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Seeking to incarnate a vulnerable God – Learning from St Francis of Assisi

I have the joy of living in community with three African nuns who have been formed by Franciscan spirituality and tradition. Prayers, recollections and discussions are often inspired and directed by the insights the sisters treasure and by our ongoing reflection on the Franciscan tradition. My own early awareness of St Francis centred on his love of creation – Brother Sun and Sister Moon – and on his focus on peace and peacemaking. But now, I realise, I had not been exposed to the core insight of Francis, its vulnerable incarnation and its subversive challenge to the society of his day ... and to ours.

A little background then two stories from Francis' early conversion journey will set the scene.

Born about the year 1182, Francis was the son of a wealthy provincial cloth merchant. His first biographer, Thomas of Celano, records him as “[m]aliciously *advancing beyond* all his *peers* in vanities, he proved himself a more excessive *inciter of evil and a zealous imitator* of foolishness ... flamboyant ... extravagant ... [and] a squanderer of property” (Compassion: Living the Spirit of St Francis, Ilia Delio, 2011, 1f). Yet he was not happy and aspired for knighthood. He joined a war with a neighbouring city-state, was captured and spent a year in prison before being ransomed and returned home. He fell seriously ill and “experienced the nearness of death and began to wonder about the direction of his life.” (ibid., 2).

Recovered, “he started wandering about in broken-down churches and would spend long periods of time praying in these places.” One day, before an icon of the crucified Christ, he “was grasped by an overwhelming experience of divine love. ... He heard a voice coming from the cross saying “Francis, go rebuild my house, as you see it is all being destroyed”

(ibid., 2f). This, he initially took literally, and began to repair San Damiano church. It was only later that he realised that “the real church to be rebuilt ... was ... the temple of his soul” (ibid., 5).

The first story of interest here is the “classic” account in the tradition of Francis meeting a “leper” on the road. The tradition emphasizes Francis’ “abhorrence” of people with leprosy. This was normal amongst his peers because of their fear of the disease’s hideous and contagious nature. Yet “[i]nstead of running away from the leper, Francis stopped, dismounted his horse, gave the leper alms, and kissed the leper’s ulcerous hand” (ibid., 5). This “outrageous act” was an act of huge risk – it was a deliberate decision to be vulnerable so as to show care, to show compassion, to this damned outcast of society. Following this encounter, Francis spent more and more time with people with leprosy, caring for them, healing their wounds and feeding them and thus “made himself as one of them in the eyes of the townspeople” (Prayers from Franciscan Hearts: Contemporary Reflections from Women and Men, Paula Pearce, 2007, 26). Francis’ “embrace of the leper symbolized rejection of all that Francis could have embraced in Assisi – power, wealth, prestige and success” (ibid.).

The second story is the natural consequence of the first. To repair the church at San Damiano and to feed the lepers, Francis had been drawing on his father’s property. This “enraged” his father who “had his son arrested and brought to trial before the bishop in the public market place” (All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for our Time, Robert Ellsberg, 1997, 432). The climax of this trial was when Francis “admitted his fault and restored his father’s money ... then ... stripped off his rich garments and handed them also to his sorrowing father” (ibid.). Naked and vulnerable, Francis let go of

his privilege and “the bishop hastily covered him with a peasant’s frock which Francis marked with a cross” (ibid.) This “sent shockwaves throughout the whole city” (Pearce, 53).

And these shockwaves were intensely real. These two stories tell of Francis choosing to be vulnerable. He embraced the most rejected in society and rejected the wealth, privilege and comfort which his society most desired. In his journey, he would have had to face his fears of being vulnerable, exposed and rejected. He would have known the reaction of his family and townsfolk, yet he did what he did. Why? Why did Francis risk being so disturbingly vulnerable?

The commentators focus on the time that Francis was near death. “His illness helped him to realize the inestimable value of the human person, and prayer helped him realize the value of his own life in God” (Delio, 8). These realisations came over time – beginning with his dissatisfaction with the life he was leading and progressing through his openness to search for something new through taking time in the wilderness and through prayer. Amidst this journey, he learnt that “the path of love is one of suffering” (ibid., 20).

Leonardo Boff argues that “[t]he biographers are unanimous in stating that Francis’ first conversion was towards the poor and crucified, and from them towards the poor and crucified Christ. ... after his conversion, the poor and the poor Christ were for him one and the same passion” (Boff, *St Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, 1985, 23). “The leper was the starting point for Francis’ experience of God” (Delio, 10).

Francis’ originality is that he “wanted to reproduce and re-present the life of Jesus” (Boff, 25), to incarnate through “*kenosis*, the humbling ... identification by God with the most despised” (ibid., 26). The “intimate and secret heart of Christianity,” he discovered, begins with “the downtrodden and the presence of God in them” (ibid.). Early Franciscan friar, Saint Bonaventure (born 1221), names the basic attitude of Francis: “A gentle feeling of compassion transformed him into the one who wanted to be crucified” (ibid., 27).

Francis’ journey is about deliberately choosing to live the incarnation. While he was immensely grateful to God for the gift of Jesus incarnated, he also knew God was calling for a response. Francis saw in the crucified Jesus a call to live incarnation in his own life. Francis experienced God “in the humility of the Incarnation” not in its “abstract metaphysical formulations” (ibid., 26). This humility of God was revealed through God in Jesus choosing to identify with those who were

poor. For Francis, “poverty and humility are pillars of compassion” (Delio, 44).

Intentional, deliberate poverty is the way of incarnation, the way to live the humility of God. Leonardo Boff explains that poverty “is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them the objects of the will to power” (quoted in Delio, 34). This is the way of God.

Delio also quotes Vladimir Lossky naming “God becomes *powerless* before human freedom.” She concludes “God does not force, control or manipulate our destinies” (ibid., 17).

Francis’ love of “Lady Poverty” opened him up to seeing that “poverty was the way into the experience of universal brotherhood (*sic*). Through poverty Francis recognized his own creatureliness, one creature among many creatures, one poor person amid the poverty of creation. He realized that, as a creature, he was “not over things, but together with them, like brothers and sisters of the same family” (ibid., 34). Delio argues that “Francis saw poverty as the basis of community because poverty is the basis of interdependence” (ibid., 42). Poverty, alongside humility, enables compassion to grow and community to be possible.

We have much to learn from Francis. Through his life, he sought to incarnate a vulnerable God. His insight into God’s *kenosis*, God’s choosing to be poor and powerless for the sake of compassion, shows us the way to true community. Kissing the leper and standing naked in the marketplace were necessary vulnerable steps. In these, he experienced God and learnt God’s way of being.

This way of Francis continues to be a subversive challenge to the dominant cultures and ideologies that shape our world. Any desire for power over other people or over the rest of creation, Francis rejects. Any desire for economic security and comfort through the ownership or control of property is challenged. In fact, Francis, in responding to a challenge by his bishop, is reported to say “if we had goods, we would need arms to defend them. And there arise arguments and contentions that in many ways impede the love of God and neighbor. Because of this we do not want to have anything of our own in this world” (Boff, 96).

Thus the way of the free market, and of the politicians who support the neo-liberal agenda, is definitely not the way of St Francis. His way was to incarnate God’s love and compassion through incarnating vulnerability.