

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1182-1226)

In 1206, Francis Bernardone, the son of a rich merchant from Assisi, Italy, began a journey of profound conversion that radically changed the tenor of his life. From being a carefree and vain young man, he became a sincere and impassioned seeker of God. About two years later, in his beloved little church of Saint Mary of the Angels, listening to the Gospel passage on Jesus' sending of his disciples, Francis was struck hard. When he heard that the apostles should not possess gold, silver, or money, but only preach the kingdom of God and repentance, he exclaimed joyfully, "This I want, this I ask, this I yearn to do with all my heart" (*Vita Prima di Tommaso da Celano*, 22: *Fonti Francescane* [FF], 356). The Gospel showed him the way and drove him to mission.

His conversion matured when, in the church of San Damiano, he heard the crucifix speak to him the divine will that he restore the Lord's house, which lay in ruins. The image of the crucifix became for him the mirror in which the faces of all crucified people were reflected. Francis literally put into practice the words of the Gospel, stripping himself of all material goods, even clothes. In a symbolic gesture, bishop Guido covered him with an episcopal cloak in the square of Assisi, meaning that the bishop would protect him from that moment forward.

As soon as Francis had formed his first group of eight companions, he sent them to four corners of the world to proclaim the word of God. He was well aware that God had entrusted a universal mission to his community, and he sought the recognition of the Supreme Pontiff. This global evangelizing sensibility was also expressed in the meeting between Francis

and Cardinal Ugolino. Contrary to the rapid and chaotic expansion of the Order, Francis said, “Do not think, sir, that the Lord sent brothers only for the good of our regions. I tell you in truth that God has chosen and sent brothers for the spiritual good and the salvation of the souls of the people of the whole world; they will be received not only in the Christian lands, but also in those of the non-believers” (*Leggenda perugina*, 82: FF, 1638).

The proclamation of the Gospel was a natural consequence of the total adhesion of Francis to Jesus Christ. The Christological criterion was decisive for the “Poverello” (Poor Fellow) in moments of doubt and perplexity. The *sequela Christi* implied not only poverty, itinerancy, and fraternity, but also missionary commitment. Francis ardently desired to dedicate himself to apostolic work, even if it meant the sacrifice of himself in the manner of Jesus. The yearning to achieve conformity with the Lord gave rise to the idea of bringing the Good News to non-believers.

After two unsuccessful attempts to reach the Holy Land and Morocco (1212-1215) and after sending Brother Egidio to Tunis and Brother Elias to Palestine, Francis joined the crusading expedition and arrived in Egypt in 1219. In the Christian camp in the city of Damietta, on the Nile delta, he served as a spiritual assistant and took care of wounded soldiers. During a ceasefire, Francis and Brother Illuminato went to the Muslim camp and asked for an audience with the sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. “To the Saracens who had taken him prisoner along the way, he repeated, ‘I am a Christian. Lead me to your lord.’ When Francis was brought before him, observing the appearance of a man of God, the cruel beast was changed into a gentle man, and for several days he listened to Francis with great attention as he preached Christ before him and his people.” (Giacomo da Vitry, *Historia Occidentalis* 14: FF 2227). Al-Malik al-Kamil, whom several contemporary sources agree was a wise and generous man, welcomed the brothers with courtesy and benevolence. Francis did not limit himself to exchange cordialities, but with simplicity, frankness, and strength he professed the Christian faith and announced the *kerygma* of salvation in Christ. Unlike

the words of many Christians and even papal addresses of that time, the “Poverello” did not use offensive language when speaking of the Muslim faith, nor did he attack the religious sensitivity of his interlocutor. The objective of his mission, however, remained well defined, and that was to convert the sultan and then – according to the practice of medieval missionaries – also the people subject to him. Some sources recount that when his fervid preaching did not bring the desired results, Francis resorted to another approach and proposed a trial by fire as the ultimate verification of his words. The sultan, seeing the panic and the anger of his advisors, did not accept the challenge, but he was deeply impressed by the friar’s faith and courage. His presence and his spiritual discourses revealed another face of Christianity and brought to light a lively and sincere experience of God. Francis’ journey to the East was apparently unsuccessful, since he did not convert the sultan and did not obtain the palm of martyrdom. However, the “Poverello” earned a friend and entrusted his Order with the task of continuing the mission and peaceful dialogue with the Islamic world. His lived experience allowed him, after returning home, to develop a missionary project for his Order with particular attention to the Muslim brothers.

Francis’ absence from Italy caused a crisis in the government of the community of brothers. The young order with an international character urgently needed precise and effective juridical regulation. Francis was the first founder of a religious order who had inserted an entire section dedicated to the missions into its legislation. Chapter XVI of the *Regula non bullata*, written in 1221, is a true “treatise on missionary methodology” and together with chapter XII of the *Regula bullata*, approved in 1223 by Pope Honorius III, lays out a program that is valid for all the friars. For the first time, the proclamation of the Gospel was not just a task of individual charismatic personalities, but the whole Franciscan Order was encouraged to follow concrete operational guidelines for carrying out the mission.

The novelty of the missionary plan conceived by Francis manifests itself in the title of chapter XVI of the *Regula non bullata*: “Regarding those who

go among the Saracens and the other non-believers.” While at that time the crusaders were “against” (*contra*) the Muslims, the “Poverello” sent his friars not only “to” (*ad*) them, but even “among” (*inter*) them. The creation of a Western colony was completely foreign to the Franciscan spirit. The prerequisites for effective missionary activities were solidarity and friendship with the local people and knowledge of Islamic culture. Later Francis presented two ways of behaving as missionaries in the Muslim territory: “One way is for them not to engage in quarrels or disputes, but to be made subject to every human creature for the love of God and to profess that they are Christians. The other way is that, when they see it pleases the Lord, missionaries announce the Word of God so that the non-believers come to believe in God Almighty, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all things, and in the Son Redeemer and Savior, and are baptized, and become Christians” (*Regula non bullata*, Chapter XVI, 7-10: FF 43). In this passage we see a new and original missionary strategy of Francis. Given top priority is the witness of one’s life animated by love of God. One’s mere presence must be meaningful and eloquent. The example of fraternity is the most effective and credible method of evangelization. The brothers must therefore renounce all claims of superiority and domination, respect the different customs, and insert themselves, as Christians, in the local context. Through the practice of Christian virtues, silent witnesses of the Gospel are required to confess their faith with courage and humility. The second element is the explicit proclamation of the Word of God, which can only take place after a careful assessment of the circumstances and after patiently waiting for the opportune moment. The missionary cannot then take possession of the word and he cannot be the stubborn usurper of the Good News; rather he must immerse himself in listening to God and discerning his will. Francis does not lose sight of the main objective of the mission, that is, the conversion of the non-believers. The decision to believe must be a personal choice and not a hasty one, which will come as the result of the efficacy of the witness and the proclamation of the friars.

The missionary journey of the “Poverello” in the East left traces in his spirituality and prompted him to assimilate some forms of piety and prayer that he found in the Islamic environment, as we read in some of his letters. In the *Letter to the Rulers of Peoples (LRP)*, Francis suggests creating in Christian countries someone whose role would be that of a public announcer and as in the manner of a muezzin, could call people together to prayer: “And you must give the Lord so much honor among the people entrusted to you that every evening an announcer proclaims or with other signs announces the praise and thanks to the Almighty Lord God from all the people” (LRP 9: FF 213). A remote echo of Francis’ proposal was the initiative of Brother Benedetto of Arezzo, former provincial minister in the Holy Land, to whom we owe the use of the bell during the recitation of the Angelus, a practice that was later received and propagated by the Franciscan Order throughout all of Christendom.

The idea of mission is present in the life of Francis from the beginning of his conversion. It comes from his desire to live the Gospel and to follow in the footsteps of the Divine Master. The creation of the nativity scene for Christmas of 1223 in Greccio, as well as the gift of the stigmata, manifest his profound spiritual and bodily identification with Jesus Christ, source and reason of his faith and his mission. Sick and weakened by a life of hardship, Francis died in Assisi on the evening of October 3, 1226.

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