

Through the eyes of St Francis of Assisi

*O most high and glorious God,
open wide the door that leads me to your love*

As you think of St Francis of Assisi, I'm sure what comes to mind is the image of *il poverello*, the saint who embraced poverty and is the icon of a life devoted to the poor, the man who was the lover of creation, who spoke of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, and who was the friend of all creatures. From Francis we have that wonderful outpouring of praise of God, *The Canticle of the Creatures*, in which he praises God through all aspects of creation: *Praised be you, my Lord, through all you have made ...* Francis is also known for the *stigmata*, the wounds of Christ that appeared on his hands, feet and sides. He had a great devotion to Christ crucified and preached about this throughout his life. La Verna in Italy is the place where Francis received the stigmata, and if you are ever in that area it is well worth winding up the narrow mountain road to the little monastery up there. Francis is always depicted in his simple brown robe, often with a bird perched on his hand or shoulder and surrounded by animals, and there are also numerous depictions of Francis receiving the stigmata.



Francis is one of those saints that everyone likes and his story and example have inspired people for centuries and continue to do so today. This week is Enviroweek and National Child Protection week, a time to think about the poor – the hurting earth crying out to us and the hurting, voiceless children in detention centres and refugee camps crying out to us - and in light of this I'd like to take a moment to look into the heart of Francis, the man who was so profoundly touched by God.

There is a story told about Francis of Assisi, perhaps more mythical than factual, which illustrates the profound change that Francis went through in order to become the saint we know today. Francis Bernardone was the son of a wealthy merchant of Assisi. He was a pampered young man, living a life of luxury and indulgence and his father's hope for his son was that Francis would follow in his footsteps and take over the family business. One night, the rich and pampered Francis, donned his flashiest clothes, mounted his horse, and set off for a night of drinking and carousing. God, social justice, and the poor were not on his mind. Riding down a narrow road, he found his path blocked by a leper. He was particularly repulsed by lepers, by their deformities and smell, and so he tried to steer his horse around the leper, but the path was

too narrow. Frustrated, angry, but with his path clearly blocked before him, Francis eventually had no other choice but to get down off his horse and try to move the leper out of his path. When he put out his hand to take the leper's arm, as he touched the leper, something inside him snapped. Suddenly irrational, unashamed and undeterred by the smell of rotting flesh, he kissed that leper. His life was never the same again. In that kiss, Francis found the reality of God and of love in a way that would change his life forever.

Whatever it was that happened to Francis, we know that the Love that grasped him required a complete change of heart and change of way of life. In beautiful Assisi there is the Church of San Rufino, and in the church there is a crucifix, before which, we are told, Francis knelt and prayed for guidance.



And as he knelt there, Francis uttered this beautiful prayer:

*O most high and glorious God,
cast your light into the darkness of my heart.
Give me right faith, and certain hope, and perfect charity.
Give me true insight, Lord, and wisdom,
that I may always live within your ever holy will.
Lord, may your light within me burn,
shining out in perfect charity.*

*O most high and glorious God,
open wide the door that leads me to your love.
Give me your firm, yet gentle strength;
may I live that perfect charity.
Lord, may your peace be ever in me,
that I may always seek to serve your children here on earth;
That I may find my home with you,
and live in perfect charity.*

*Then most high and thankful praise
I will sing unto the glory of your name:
Creator, Son, and Spirit bright, Living Presence, Perfect Charity.
Praise to the Love that shines in splendour,*

*that lights the pathways of my heart,
and brings me close to you.
O Holy One, invite me in,
where you live in perfect charity.*

The words of this prayer are exquisitely beautiful and moving. It is the prayer of a man who has surrendered his all. Francis knew that this Love, awakened in his heart, required nothing less of him than a total conversion. The Greek word from which we get our term 'conversion' is *metanoia*, which means a complete change of heart and mind, embracing thoughts which go beyond present limitations. It is often translated as repentance, but always a repentance which brings about a complete inner transformation. It's what Jesus meant when he spoke of the need to be 'born again' (John 3:3). When Jesus first used this expression to tell his disciples what was required of them, in characteristic fashion, they didn't know what he was talking about and Nicodemus wondered whether it meant going back into the womb and literally being born a second time! But what Jesus was speaking of then, and what he sets before us now, is this need to allow all aspects of ourselves to be transformed, enlightened, to allow, as Francis said, God to light the pathways of our heart. Conversion, change of heart, is to surrender utterly to God's will. What happened to Francis was a real conversion. What took place within his heart and life was what St Paul wrote about when he said, *Now, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me* (Galatians 2:20).

Francis also left us some very clear ways to allow this conversion to take place within us. It's a lifelong process. He emphasised simplicity, which, as he said, sets us free from the clamorous voices inside us; poverty, which sets us free from not only the desire for riches, but also the worries of our life; obedience, which is a disciplined way of living which allows us to serve God and others; humility, which prevents us from thinking overmuch of ourselves.

Transformation is a key concept in Christian spirituality. As with Francis, it has two dimensions. It is finding our home with God. As he says, it is being invited in by God, it is letting God's light burn within us, but it is also about going out to others, to the poor. As Francis says, it is about serving God's children. Authentic Christian spirituality will always hold these two aspects in balance. We need to develop our own ways and practices of opening our hearts to God, allowing the darkness to be transformed, listening, quietly and gently allowing God to work in us, to shape and re-mould us. And we must serve others.

This week, you may like to pray with Francis, let his words draw you in. In your stillness, come to God. In poverty, let go of your agenda. In humility and simplicity say: *Open wide the door that leads me to your love.*

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