

Saint Francis and the Holy Spirit

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Perhaps in a moment of exaltation, or more likely in a period of desolation, Saint Francis came to see that the true Minister General of our Religion (the Order) is the Holy Spirit, who rests equally on the poor and simple as on those who has been rich and wise in the world, equally on the untutored friar as on the learned cleric (2C 193). Since he wished to add this insight to the Rule, but could not, as it had already been approved by Honorius III, such a dictum must be dated between 29 November 1223 and the death of Saint Francis, the evening of 3 October, 1226.

But what gave rise to such a thought? Hardly the immediate context of Thomas of Celano, who places it under the rubric, How the Saint wished to be shaved and shorn: "He would often say to the barber: Take care not to make my tonsure too big! I want my simple lettered brothers to have a share in my head." The barber's chair is good for meditation, but it does not seem to have lifted Francis to the higher contemplation of the role of the Spirit.

Did such an intuition come to him when in the midst of the crises the growing Order passed through both before and after the approval of the final Rule? Once when he heard of the bad example given by some friars (more an instance of false humility than anything else), he strongly reacted to the point of asking the Lord to curse those who by their actions destroyed what God had built up and was building up through holy friars (2C 156). Even to hear of such deeds was to feel a sharp sword piercing his heart (2C 157). At the same time, the Lord assured him that the Order would survive, and that other, new sons would replace those who fell away. It was in such a time of anguish indeed that the Lord took him to task and taught him to see things in the light of eternity. Touched to the heart by the way things were going, Francis turned to God in prayer, to commend to His keeping the family he had given him. The answer from on high was a bit blunt:

“Why are you anxious, poor little man? Tell me, who was it that founded the Order of the friars? Who is it that draws a man to do penance? Who gives them the grace to persevere? You or I? I did not choose you to govern my family because you were learned or eloquent; no, I chose you because you were simple, that you and the others might know that it is I who watch over My flock. You I gave them as a norm to follow, that seeing the works I do in you they might do them likewise. This is My way; and if they walk in it, they will possess me in abundance; if they fall from the path, even what they seem to have will be taken from them. Wherefore I tell you; be not sad, but do what you are about and do it well. Only remember that it is I who in my undying love have planted this Order. To show you how much I cherish the life and the Order of the friars, I say to you that if it were reduced to only three friars, I would never abandon it” (AC 112a (LP 86)).

Francis was thus at peace because the Lord had shown His power and His will. His duty henceforth was to pray daily to the Lord that he would govern and preserve, protect and defend the religion (Order) of the friars; and to teach his brothers, more by example than by word, what they must do, and what to avoid (AC 112b). Out of such a soul-searing experience perhaps came the intuition that neither Francis nor Elias counted as anything for the Order; for the true Minister General was the Holy Spirit.

The Writings of Francis

Such insights on the role of the Spirit in his life and in that of his brothers are not the first that Francis had received. Whoever has professed his Rule or that of St. Clare knows that both bid us seek above all else to have the Spirit of the Lord and the workings of His grace in us, to pray always to Him with undivided heart, and to have humility, patience and love (LR 10: 9-12; FICl 10:11).

Yet long before this Rule, in the first months after the conversion of Clare and her early companions (hence, sometime in 1212), Francis wrote for them a form of life in which he calls them spouses of the Holy Spirit: “Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most high and sovereign King, the heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit....” (FICl 6: 3). Francis here stands in marked contrast to the traditional view expressed in an undated letter to Clare of Pope Gregory IX: “God the Father, to whom you have offered yourself as servants, has mercifully adopted you as daughter. Through the operation of the grace of the Holy Spirit, He has espoused you, who are to be crowned in heaven with your heavenly spouse, to His

only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ (Surprisingly too, Francis says nothing, at least as reported by Clare, of the spiritual relation of the Poor Ladies to the Word incarnate.)

He is much clearer a few years later (c. 1215?), in an early form of the so-called *Letter to the Faithful* (c. 1221) found by Paul Sabatier in a manuscript of Volterra.² The Latin is so poor that we may suspect Francis wrote it by himself; the thought is truly his, pure and profound, first “On those who do penance,” and then “On those who do not.” Our attention is focused primarily on the first chapter, which corresponds to the middle section of the Letter (1LtF I:1-10):

In the Name of the Lord! All who love the Lord with (their) whole heart and soul and mind, with all (their) strength, and love their neighbors as themselves; and hate their bodies with (their) vices and sin; and received the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and bring forth fruits worthy of penance: O how blessed are the men and women who do such things and persevere in them, because the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon them and make His dwelling and abode in them And they are children of the heavenly Father whose works they do; and they are spouses, brothers and mothers of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined by the Holy Spirit to Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers to Him when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven. Mothers, when we carry Him in our heart and body through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience. We bring Him to birth by our holy conduct which must shine before others as an example.

The Latin of the phrases which follow, as also in the *Letter to the Faithful*, with masculine forms of adjectives (in the accusative case) where the sense would seem to require the neuter, can be and is the despair of the translator. In addition, *paracitum* appears as an adjective, likely in the sense of “consoling” or “helpful.” But the reaction of Francis to the work of the Spirit in us is crystal-clear. He bursts into wonderment and praise at the dignity that is ours. Through the Spirit we have been born anew as children of the Father: “O how holy, consoling, beautiful and marvelous to have such a Spouse! O how holy and delightful, gratifying (yet) humbling, how peaceful, sweet, lovable, how far surpassing all other desires, is it to have

¹“Letter of Pope Gregory IX”, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, trans. R. Armstrong (NY: New City Press, 2006), p. 131. (Today, scholars date this letter to 1228, after Gregory’s visit to San Damiano at the time of Francis’ canonization – the editor.)

²1 LtF, FA:ED 1, pp. 41-44.

such a Brother and such a Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who laid down His life for His sheep!"

There is something here perhaps that is close to St. Bernard. Yet we would be hard-pressed to discover any direct nexus between Francis and the *Doctor mellifluus*. Later, Francis would be close to Ranieri Capocci, a Cistercian cardinal, who may even have helped him write down some of his thoughts. Of a certainty, however, if he is the cardinal of 2 Celano 104, Ranieri did not impart wisdom, but sought it at the feet of Francis, the man taught by the Spirit of God. Like the Dominican theologian at Siena who confessed: "My brothers, this man's knowledge of God (literally, this man's theology) is like an eagle in flight, borne upon the wings of purity of heart and contemplation" (2C 195), the Cardinal in the Eternal City gladly listened to Francis because he possessed the Spirit of God and drew his wisdom from God alone.

But Francis was "ever new" (2C 159) and ever seeking new insights into the ways of God in the hearts of the pure and simple. This seems especially true in the first years after his return from the East (1220) when he wrote or, more likely dictated a whole series of letters, most of which are means he used to promote care and devotion to the Eucharist in keeping with Lateran IV and Honorius III's letters of November 1219; and Francis composed his *Admonitions* and the *Rule* usually assigned to 1221.

Apart from some brief letters, almost all these writings are filled with a call to life in the Spirit. Parallel passages abound, proving how caught up Francis was in living and conveying to others, to the friars in the *1221 Rule*, to religious Christians in his first *Letter to the Faithful*, to both (perhaps) in his *Admonitions*, especially in the first of these.

If the Spirit lives and works in us, then we shall love and adore the Father with pure heart and pure mind (freed from every selfish affection or desire), always praying and not losing heart for this is what He seeks above all else, that we worship Him in Spirit and in truth (ER 22). How closely Francis shares in St. Paul's vision of the working of the Spirit in us, of His prayer in us and for us (Rom 8:23-27)! We must not be wise and prudent as men account these things, but rather be simple, humble and free of self, that the Spirit may rest upon us and act in us.

It is the same Spirit abiding in those who believe in Him, who gives us to see and to believe that the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whence it follows, says Francis, that it is the Spirit of the Lord dwelling in us who receives the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord, "while those who have not a part in that Spirit and yet presume to receive Him eat and drink judgment upon themselves" (Adm I:13).

The Life of Francis

The Little Poor Man who wrote such simple but burning words was himself rich in the Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord, says Bonaventure, who had anointed Francis and sent him forth, was with him always wherever he went, making his words a burning fire which penetrated men's hearts and filled them with wonder at his wisdom and knowledge (LMj XII:7). Yet to have reached the point where the Spirit was ever his guide implied a long growth on his part in the ways of God. He had not always understood what the Lord wanted of him or where the Spirit was leading him. Would he have known, when he fell sick as a young man, that this was God's way, as Bonaventure interprets it, of preparing his soul for the anointing of the Spirit (LMj I:2)? At the end he did know, as the opening lines of the *Testament* reveal, that God had always been leading him and drawing him to Himself (Test 1-4). Or again, to steal an interpretation from Celano (1C 38), when the Lord gave him brothers and inspired him to find in the Gospel the fundamentals of their life, did he know then that the Spirit was building in them a dwelling place for Himself? On their part the first friars soon learned that Francis was a man of the Spirit, that the Spirit of the Lord rested in him with great fullness, since he was able to read their hearts and direct their own spirits along the ways of God (1C 48; LMj IV: 4).

A prayerful reading of the first half of the *Testament* (vv.1-23), which perhaps was composed earlier than the rest, reveals that it is a document of the Spirit. His whole life from his conversion to his death Francis sees as guided by the Spirit: the Lord gave me the grace to begin to do penance, in a new life under His guidance. He led me among the lepers and tore me out of my old self.... He gave me a living faith in churches (and thus in the Church), in priests (and in the Son of God whom I see in them), in the Eucharist (and all that surrounds it), and in God' words a spirit and life. He gave me brothers who joined me because the Lord so inspired them. He then opened the Gospel to me as our way of life, the marrow of which under His guidance we adopted as our *Rule*. Through Him we came to peace of heart, and thus our payer for you is: The Lord give you peace.

The Franciscan Life

Thus far Saint Francis, *unus novellus pazzus in mundo*, a new fool in this world (AC 18), who sought to follow the Gospel way shown him by the Spirit, totally conscious that this way was quite other than that of Augustine or Bernard or Benedict. All too well we know the scene at the Chapter of Mats (1222), when some learned brothers prevailed on Cardinal Hugolino to suggest to Francis that like those monastic lawgivers he should provide more precise regulation.

They wanted a *Rule* which would say that Thus and Thus was to be our life. Francis wanted a *Rule* that would be no more and no less than the very marrow of the Gospel, a *Rule* open to the spirit and the workings of His grace at all times, in all circumstances and needs of the Church, the people of God, the friars themselves.

No one would come to the Order and persevere in it unless he were drawn by the Spirit (AC 50; 2C 40). The newcomer would then give his worldly goods away as the Lord inspired; if need be, he would seek the counsel of the Spirit through God-fearing persons. Those who promised to obey this life and *Rule* would show to the world the life of the Spirit by their meekness, peacefulness and modesty, their gentleness and humility, their openness in speech and manner; and bring peace to every house they entered (LR III:10-14). Their poverty would be joyous, because it was the portion of Christ himself; their labor diligent, yet in no way harmful to the things of the Spirit, but imbued with devotion and somehow always making positive tribute to their inner life of prayer, their very needs would call forth the love of their brothers in the Spirit (LR V-VI). Gentleness and mercy would mark their ministers and servants, especially toward the erring; and all would avoid anger and irritation as harmful to the charity of the Spirit. Their leaders would lead them as though they led them not, because their office was one of service. Channels of the peace of the Spirit, they would seek out, encourage and admonish their brothers in all humility and charity, for both of them had given up their wills to the Lord and had promised to observe the same *Rule* in the way the Spirit led them (LR X:9).

Had not the Spirit raised the noble structure of charity, which is the Order and family of Francis, on the foundations of constancy and fidelity to the Gospel way of life (1C 38)? If he (the Spirit) is the true founder, the true Minister General, must not all the brothers avoid whatever might impede the workings of His grace: all pride and vain glory in what He does in them, all envy of what He accomplishes in and through others, all selfishness and worry about this world, all slander and backbiting? Instead, all must desire above all else the Spirit of the Lord, His rule in patience in the face of opposition, persecution and human weakness Who perseveres in these things to the end will have the gift of Life eternal (LR 10:8)!

Such is the life in the Spirit as Francis describes it in the *Rule*; and Clare follows him closely. It does not hem us in, but liberates us for God; for where the Spirit of the Lord lives and reigns, there is freedom! Where indeed there is joy and gladness of heart in the words and works of the Lord, a man comes to see what his true worth is: Who he is before God, that he is and nothing more (Adm XIX). Where there is charity and wisdom, because the Spirit rules, neither fear nor ignorance can enter in. Where there is

patience and humility, there is neither anger nor resentment of heart. Where there is fear of the Lord (and joy in Him) to guard the stronghold of the Lord, our heart, the enemy can find no way to get in (Adm XXVII).

Francis possessed by experience a true insight, in reality a whole theology of the Spirit working in us. But we should be hard put to find a commentary on the Rule that truly shared his vision! Perhaps John of Wales along, in the late 13th century, caught some of it. Hugh of Digne, John Pecham (pseudo-Bonaventure), and even Peter Olivi seem to have missed it. How much more the later legalistic glosses! Today, in a new age of the Spirit, all of us have much to learn of the Spirit of the Lord and the workings of His life and grace in the Order and in each one of us. We must cry out with Blessed Angela of Foligno after a visitation of the Spirit: *O amore non conosciuto*: O love that is not known! We must learn from Francis to live always in joy and jubilee of heart, and to treasure always the anointing of the Spirit and the oil of gladness (AC 120B; 2C 125); and heed his plea that with clean heart and pure mind we seek always to do what the Lord wants of us and ever make in ourselves a house and dwelling for Him who is the Lord God almighty, Father and Son and Holy Spirit (ER 22)!

“Almighty, eternal, just an merciful God, give to us wretches for Your own sake to do what we know to be Your will and always to will what is pleasing to You, that inwardly cleansed, inwardly enlightened, inwardly aflame with the fire of the Holy Spirit, we may follow the footsteps of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and by Your grace alone come to You who are Most High!” (LtOrd 50-52).