

The Salutation of the Virtues

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“Lo que confunde a Satanás: el saludo de las virtudes”

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Francis's *Prayer inspired by the Our Father* was the result of his prolonged meditation on the Our Father and his frequent recitation of that prayer. His brothers brought his Prayer everywhere with them, and it helped to shape their daily lives. However, although his *Salutation (or Praises) of the Virtues*, is quite different from his *Prayer inspired by the Our Father*, it, too, greatly influenced the day-to-day life of the first Franciscans. While the *Salutation* is not, strictly speaking, a prayer, it did spring from Francis's spirit of prayer and from his long years of meditation and experience of life. While we do not know when it was set down in writing, we do have solid proof of its authenticity, since Thomas of Celano informs us that Francis composed the *Praises of the Virtues (laudes de virtutibus)*, and he quotes the first verse word for word. Not only that, but the contents and poetic form of the *Salutation* are in perfect harmony with the way the Troubadour of Assisi thought and spoke.

The Brothers' Style of Preaching

Before the promulgation of the *Later Rule* (1223), all the Friars Minor, both cleric and lay, were given permission to “preach penance,” that is, to give short sermons urging the people to do penance and to praise God. Whenever the occasion arose, the brothers were allowed to engage in this “extra-liturgical” form of preaching, which was well-suited to the ordinary people and close to their everyday lives. It was, indeed, the “layman's preaching” which Pope Innocent III had authorized them to do. The friars

were engaged, then, in *penitential and moral*, as distinct from *doctrinal*, preaching: that is, they spoke only about “vices and virtues.”

In the *Earlier Rule*, we have an example of this kind of sermon, a typical one of “exhortation and praise,” *exhortatio et laus*, which consists mainly of various biblical admonitions (RegNB 21); and in the second Rule, we find a passage which is even closer to the *Salutation* and in which Francis says:

I... admonish and exhort these brothers, that, in their preaching, their words be well chosen and chaste, for the instruction and edification of the people, speaking to them of vices and virtues, punishment and glory in a discourse that is brief, because it was in a few words that the Lord preached while on earth (RegB 9:3f).

This part of the Rule asking for brevity in speaking about vices and virtues, is completely in accord with the *Salutation*. Here, as in the first Rule (RegNB 21), we have an example of the type of preaching which Francis bequeathed to his followers. And when advising his brothers to speak briefly, he spoke with brevity himself, giving them a concrete instance, a model in word and deed, of what he wished them to do. As in other things, he showed that he was the exemplar, the living prototype, the true “pattern of the Minors,” as Julian of Speyer called him in his hymn to the first Friar Minor.

The *Salutation* belongs to the category of *laudi*, those songs of praise and exhortation which, as God’s troubadours, the Friars Minor sang to the people. Even more than the *Canticle* or *Preface of Praise and Thanksgiving* in the *First Rule* (RegNB 23), the *Salutation* embodies the spirit of the troubadours and minstrels, the lyric poets and the knights. In it, with vivid poetic imagery and using the language of the courtly love, Francis personified the virtues as “ladies” and called wisdom a “queen.”

At this time, “vices and virtues” were the theme of many works of art, writings, paintings and sculptures, which must have influenced the Saint. In fact, the *Salutation*, more than any other of Francis’s writings, shows the influence of contemporary Latin rhythmical prose and the courtly lyrics of the Provençal poets. The following arrangement of the text will help us to appreciate its artistic structure:

Salutation of the Virtues

Greetings

- A 1. Hail, Queen Wisdom,
may the Lord protect you,
with your sister, holy pure Simplicity.
2. Lady, holy Poverty,
may the Lord protect you,
with your sister, holy Humility.
3. Lady, holy Charity,
may the Lord protect you,
with your sister, holy Obedience.
4. O most holy Virtues,
may the Lord protect all of you,
from whom you come and proceed.

One or none

- B 5. There is surely no one in the whole world
who can possess any one of you
unless he dies first.
6. Whoever possesses one (of you)
and does not offend the others,
possesses all.
7. And whoever offends one (of you)
does not possess any
and offends all.
8. And each one frustrates vices and sins.

Effects

- C 9. Holy Wisdom
frustrates Satan
and all his subtlety.
10. Pure holy Simplicity
frustrates all the wisdom of this world (1 Cor 2:6)
and the wisdom of the body.

11. Holy Poverty
frustrates the desire of riches and avarice
and the cares of this world.
12. Holy Humility
frustrates pride and all the people who are in the world
and all things that belong to the world.
13. Holy Charity
frustrates every temptation of the devil and of the flesh
and every carnal fear.
14. Holy Obedience
frustrates every wish of the body and of the flesh
15. and subjects the mortified body
to obedience of the Spirit
and to obedience of one's brother
16. and subjects and submits it to everyone
in the world,
17. and not only to other people
but also to all beasts and wild animals
18. so that they may do with it
whatever they want
inasmuch as it has been given to them from above by the
Lord (cf. Jn 19:11).¹

Structure and Style

The *Salutation of the Virtues* has much in common with the *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*: for example, both begin with *Ave*, "Hail"—"Hail, Queen Wisdom" and "Hail, O Lady, holy Queen, Mary, Mother of God."

The *Salutation of the Virtues* opens with the virtues being greeted as persons and a wish expressed: "May the Lord protect you." Then we are told

¹ *Translator's note*: This translation is taken from R. J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. and I. C. Brady, O.F.M.: *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, N.Y., 1982, pp.151f., with some variations.

with whom each of the virtues is to be protected, a *companion* "with" whom and *not a means* "by which" protection is to be afforded.

The verses are similar in structure and are set down in three groups: their similarity is especially apparent in vv. 1-4 and 9-13. Each verse has three elements; and the whole work presents and explains three pairs of virtues. In addition, the text is divided into three parts, which we can call Stanzas A, B and C.

Stanza A contains vv. 1-4, which are constructed symmetrically. The first word, "Hail," indicates the theme of the work, the *Salutation* of the Virtues. These virtues are three, wisdom, poverty and charity and are called "ladies." Each is accompanied by a sister virtue and is protected along with it. In v.4, there is a leap forward, and the virtues are no longer simply called "holy" but "most holy" and are spoken of as a group, "Most holy virtues...." This verse is, as it were, the end of stanza A, and it shows that the Lord is the source from which all the virtues spring. The thought here is the same as that with which the *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary* ends:

And (hail) all you holy virtues, which through the grace and light of the Holy Spirit, are poured into the hearts of the faithful so that, from their faithless state, you may make them faithful to God (SalBVM 6).

Stanza B begins with vv.5-8 and does not use the *vocative* but the *indicative* mood of the verb. The theme of this stanza is our relationship with the virtues. When do we possess the virtues? When we renounce our egoism and die to self. This stanza shows clearly how Francis viewed the virtues as a unity, as different effects of the same divine power which has to suffuse our whole being. And because each virtue affects the whole person and not just one part of human life, none of the virtues can be separated from the others.

Stanza C contains the entire second half of the *Salutation*, from v.9 to v.18. Whereas stanza B dealt with the virtues in general, stanza C returns to speaking about each one in particular and in the same order in which they appear in stanza A. From v.9 to v.14, all the verses begin in the same way. Verses 15 through 18 are not independent sentences but are continuations of v.14. K. Esser subdivided v.14 simply because it was too long, compared with the other verses.

The theme of stanza C is the effects of the virtues. The verb "frustrates" is the motif and central idea in all the verses in this section. This *frustrating* or *confounding* (*confundit*, in Latin) is the antithesis, the opposite, of *saving* or *protecting* (*salvet*, in Latin), which is the key word in all the verses

in stanza A. The poetic power and brilliance of the Salutation is due, not only to its parallel passages, but also, to a great extent, to the contrasts, the antitheses, it provides.

These antitheses are emphasized strongly: the most sublime virtues are set over against the worst vices: the Lord and the virtues, His "ladies," conquer *Satan* and his wickedness. Just as *virtue* has many names, so, too, has *evil*—greed, avarice, pride, fear. Francis the poet sees the virtues as holy because they come from God, their only source. Evil, on the other hand, is bound up with this world and this time, with the flesh and the body. However, although this view of the body and the world as our enemies had become widespread since the time of St. Augustine, we must not forget that the opposition between God and the world goes back to Sacred Scripture and that St. Paul in particular had experienced this enmity and had discerned its theological foundation (cf., for example, Rom 8:1-17).

When Francis drew such a vivid contrast between God and the world, between virtue and evil, he was aiming to achieve the purpose of his preaching—to dramatize the contrast between vice and virtue, to move his hearers and to shake them out of their spiritual apathy. His use of contrast or antithesis and the personification of the virtues were, indeed, devices of poetic eloquence, but here they had a deeper meaning, as we can see from the fact that the Saint gave human faces to his "ladies," the virtues, but not to the vices.

Commentary

It would be impossible here to comment on all the virtues in the light of Francis's writings and biographical sources, since the Saint and his first biographers wrote countless times about poverty, humility and the other virtues. We shall, then, confine ourselves to recalling various passages from Francis's writings in order to show that the short verses of the *Salutation* are really a summary of the Franciscan way of following Christ.

1. "Queen Wisdom" and "holy pure Simplicity."

We do not know but can only surmise why Francis began the *Salutation of the Virtues* by invoking the virtue of wisdom; nor do we know why he called the virtue a queen. Perhaps the answer is to be found in a passage from his *Second Letter to the Faithful* in which he says that when people do not do penance, it is due to the fact that "they do not have

spiritual wisdom because they do not have within them the Son of God, who is the true wisdom of the Father" (2EpFid 67; cf. 1EpFid 2:8).

In one of his *Admonitions*, he also speaks about "a special knowledge of the highest wisdom" received "from the Lord" (Adm 5:6). Elsewhere, he says that:

The spirit of the flesh wishes and is most eager to have... *the wisdom of this world*.... But the Spirit of the Lord wishes the flesh to be mortified and despised.... And, above all things, it always longs for the divine fear and the divine *wisdom* and the divine love of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (RegNB 17:10,14-16).

In the book of Sirach, we read: "To fear the Lord is the root of wisdom" (Sir 1:20). It is possible that Francis had some knowledge of the "sapiential" or wisdom books of the *Old Testament* and that, for example, he was familiar with the "Discourse on Wisdom" which forms Chapter 24 of the "Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach," the *Old Testament* book from which we have just quoted. So it may be that Francis mentioned wisdom first and called it a queen because Christ is Wisdom Incarnate. As he says in his *Salutation of the Virtues*, all wisdom and all the virtues "come and proceed" from God (SalVirt 4).

Francis also alludes to the sisterly relationship between wisdom and pure simplicity in his *Second Letter to the Faithful*, where he contrasts simplicity with the wisdom of the flesh: "We must not be *wise* and prudent according to the flesh: rather, we must be *simple*, humble and pure" (2EpFid 45). The wisdom of the flesh is opposed to Queen Wisdom, the wisdom of God. Holy Simplicity protects her sister, Wisdom, by unmasking false wisdom. Francis makes this clear very effectively in his *Admonition 7*:

The Apostle says: The letter kills, but the spirit gives life. Those are killed by the letter who merely wish to know the words alone, so that they may be esteemed as wiser than others and be able to acquire great riches to give to their relatives and friends.

True wisdom is simple and does not need great subtlety: it unmask deception and excludes any form of vanity or vainglory:

For if you were so subtle and wise that you had all knowledge and knew how to interpret all tongues and minutely investigate the course of the heavenly bodies, in all these things you could not glory.... But in this we can glory: in our infirmities and bearing daily the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Adm 5:5, 8).

Those who attain wisdom through simplicity oppose Satan and his wickedness, the root of evil (SalVirt 9). The queen of all the virtues frustrates the author of all evil. Out of pride, Satan wanted to be like God, but, instead, he is conquered by wisdom, which simply and sincerely attributes everything good to God and acts guilelessly, giving no thought to any possible earthly reward or approval.

We all know people, often older people, in whom this close relationship between wisdom and simplicity is quite apparent. They seldom speak and then only briefly and simply, but their words are wise; and the wiser these people become, the more they advance in simplicity. Nothing disturbs their inner peace, for they know how paltry are the things of earth compared with those of eternity. Above all, they know that, in the end, everything depends on God and on having a clear conscience. Nothing else counts.

2. "Holy Poverty" and "holy Humility"

Lady holy Poverty and her sister, holy Humility, are the second pair of virtues named in the *Salutation*. It is commonly believed that complete renunciation of material possessions and reliance on alms are the outstanding characteristics of the Franciscans. But here in the *Salutation of the Virtues*, we see Francis putting poverty in third place and understanding it mainly as *inner* poverty, which "frustrates the desire of riches, and avarice and the cares of this world" (v.11). He does not contrast poverty with wealth but only with avarice and worldly cares. The enemy of humility is pride (v.12). Life "without property" is not guaranteed even by leaving the world and entering an Order, where everything belongs to everyone. True poverty consists in renouncing everything and keeping nothing back for oneself. Before God, we possess nothing: "We should be firmly convinced that nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins" (RegNB 17:7).

Francis also speaks elsewhere about the sisterly bond between poverty and humility. Chapter 9 of the first Rule begins by requiring that "All the brothers should strive to follow *the humility and the poverty* of our Lord Jesus Christ" (RegNB 9:1). In the second Rule, we read:

As pilgrims and strangers in this world who serve the Lord in *poverty and humility*, let them go begging for alms with full trust. Nor should they feel ashamed since the Lord made Himself poor in this world. This is that summit of highest poverty which has established you, my most beloved

brothers, as heirs and kings of the kingdom of heaven; it has made you poor in the things of this world but exalted you in *virtue* (RegB 6:2-4).

The same Rule concludes by summing up our life:

...so that, always submissive and prostrate at the feet of the same holy Church, and steadfast in the Catholic faith, we may observe the *poverty* and the *humility* and the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which we have firmly promised (RegB 12:4).

Poverty and humility are inseparably bound together, a union that is expressed perfectly in the name “lesser brothers” and even more beautifully in the title often given to Francis, whose poverty and humility were so marked that, with justice, he was known as the *Poverello*, “the Little Poor Man.”

3. “*Holy Charity*” and “*holy Obedience*”

The most surprising thing is that Francis gives *charity* and *obedience* as the third pair of virtues. Linking charity with obedience is typical of Francis—and note that he mentions charity first. True obedience springs from love, and love without obedience is not true charity. In his third Admonition, the title and theme of which is “Perfect Obedience,” he states that:

That person leaves everything he possesses and loses his body who surrenders his whole self to obedience at the hands of his prelate. And whatever he does and says which he knows is not contrary to his prelate’s will, provided that what he does is good, is *true obedience*. And should the subject sometimes see that some things might be better and more useful for his soul than what the prelate may command him, let him willingly offer such things to God as a sacrifice, and instead earnestly try to fulfill the wishes of the prelate. For this is *loving obedience* because it pleases God and neighbor (Adm 3:3-6).

When we are obedient out of love, we shall refrain from doing something which we think better and more suitable because we love God and our superior. The limits to which love may go in the pursuit of obedience are reached if a superior commands something that is against the conscience of his subject. In such a case, Francis says that the subject should not obey the superior, but

still (the subject) should not abandon (the superior). And if, in consequence, (the subject) suffers persecution from others, *let him love them* even more for the love of God. For whoever chooses to endure persecution rather

than be separated from his brothers truly remains in perfect obedience, for he lays down his life for his brothers (Adm 3:7-9).

We can be martyrs for conscience's sake even in our own community! Our brothers and sisters may think that we are being disobedient and may persecute us for it. Yet so long as we show our love for our brothers and sisters by our suffering and self-sacrifice for them and do not break our bonds with the community, then we are living in perfect obedience. (We are immediately reminded of the commitment which St. Clare and other founders and foundresses of Orders required in this matter.)

For Francis, charity was the norm and criterion of every activity. Loving our neighbor as ourselves means treating others, especially when they are in any kind of need, as we would wish them to treat us if we were in the same situation (cf. RegNB 4:4-6). Sinners that we are, we all depend on the mercy of God. Therefore, if superiors see the need to correct someone, they should always do it with charity. They must not allow themselves to give in to anger or to make hasty judgments. The sinner needs special love:

And if he should sin thereafter a thousand times before your very eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him back to the Lord (EpMin 11).

Love of enemies is *the height of charity*. This love can be based only on supernatural motives. That is why Francis prayed:

And whatever we do not forgive perfectly, do you, Lord, enable us to forgive to the full so that we may truly love our enemies and fervently intercede for them before you, returning no one evil for evil and striving to help everyone in you (ExpPat 8).

Forgiveness like this demands self-renunciation: and such self-sacrifice reaches its greatest heights in martyrdom. Francis hoped that those who went among non-believers would be ready to bear with all kinds of suffering and injustice and even death itself (cf. RegNB 16:10-21). He himself traveled to Muslim countries in the hope of gaining a martyr's crown (1Cel 55-57).

This explains why he stressed obedience so strongly in his *Salutation of the Virtues*. His commentary on obedience (vv.14-18) is as long as his remarks on all the virtues he mentioned before (vv.9-13).

True charity is free from all selfishness, as we can see from vv.14f.:

Holy Obedience frustrates every wish of the body and of the flesh and subjects the mortified body to obedience of the Spirit and to obedience to one's brother.

The phrase "subjects the mortified body" means the same as the word "dies" in v.5. We must lay aside our own will, we must die and empty ourselves of self so that we may be open to receive the virtues, the kingdom of God. Obedience is the real proof that we have done this because it shows whether or not we have really overcome our selfishness. As the *Salutation of the Virtues* describes it, obedience is the perfection of wisdom mentioned at the beginning of the text; it is the seal of authenticity of all the other virtues, the touchstone that shows how free and stripped of self we really are. When we are truly obedient, we are alert and listening to the Spirit of the Lord, to our brothers and sisters.

Francis set no limits to those whom we should regard as our brothers and sisters. Real self-abnegation makes us subject to "all persons," and so that there should be no misunderstanding about such an unusual statement, he added "all persons *in the world*," that is, everyone in the whole world. And not content with that radical view of obedience, he went on:

and not to man only but even to all beasts and wild animals, so that they may do whatever they want with (us) inasmuch as it has been given to them from above by the Lord (vv.17f.).

This takes obedience to the extreme, seeing it as universal, without limits or conditions of any kind. When we surrender ourselves entirely to God, not only must we be ready to suffer martyrdom at the hands of other people but also to be torn apart by wild animals. It is possible that Francis was influenced here by the stories of the martyrs who had been thrown to the beasts in the arena; for example, the account of the martyrdom of St. Ignatius of Antioch. But it is simpler to account for his views by remembering his own experience. For instance, there was the story about his encounter with the wolf of Gubbio. When he showed not the least sign of hostility to the wolf but treated it like a brother and saw to its needs, he changed the animal's attitude and turned it into *Brother Wolf*. In any case, Francis regarded wild beasts in the same light as he did enemies (cf. RegNB 22:1-4), that is, simply as instruments in the hands of God, for our enemies can treat us only "as it has been given them from above by the Lord" (SalVirt 18).

This goes far beyond the mere sociological function of obedience. We must be so ruled by obedience that we are always the "lesser brothers"

whom others can use according as God wills. In his *Second Letter to the Faithful*, Francis tells us that: "We must never desire to be above others; rather we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God's sake" (1Pet 2:13) (2EpFid 47). In his *Salutation of the Virtues*, he quotes these words from St. Peter's letter and widens their meaning to include all animals, domesticated and wild, yet with no hint of sentimentality. We must remember here that, in Francis's time, there were many more wild beasts roaming around Europe than there are today. Encountering such beasts, then, must not have been a rare occurrence for the first Friars Minor, as, homeless and stateless, they traveled far and wide preaching. Francis, therefore, was not being merely theoretical nor was he indulging in poetic exaggeration but was convinced that nothing bad could happen to anyone who was truly obedient:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:35, 38f.; cf. 1Cor 4:7-15; 6:4-10).

Obedience is a trusting self-surrender to God's will: "Even if (others) lay hands on you, you should desire that things be this way and not otherwise" (EpMin 2f.). This is the loving obedience of those who allow God to be God in all the circumstances of their lives. This openness, this readiness to obey, makes possible a profound, total reconciliation between us and other creatures. It brings an inner peace that is like "a return to Paradise." Not only does it reach to the depths of our being, but it is also a visible reality for all creation to see. The story of the wolf of Gubbio illustrates this, as does Celano's description of Francis's relationship with wild creatures (2Cel 165-171).

Obedience, poverty and humility, then, form part of the unifying, all-embracing peace which is possible only when our hearts are so receptive to love that the fount of God's goodness can spring up in them. As Francis says: "The true peacemakers are those who preserve peace of mind and body out of love of our Lord Jesus Christ, despite what they suffer in the world" (Adm 15:2). When the love of Him "who placed His will at the will of the Father" and died for us all (2EpFid 10)—when that love has "frustrate(d) every temptation of the devil and of the flesh" (SalVirt 13), then obedience becomes a serene, trusting surrender to the providence and goodness of God, who rules creation. Then following Christ turns into praise, so that

Francis was able to express in a short, inspired poem the awesome and almost superhuman aims of the following of Christ.

Francis followed the same train of thought in his *Admonition 27*, which is similar in theme and structure to his *Salutation of the Virtues*. This *Admonition* is entitled "How Virtue drives out Vice" and is the only *Admonition* written in poetic form. It consists of six sentences, each of which has two sections beginning respectively with "Where there is..." and "there is..."; six is also the number of virtues mentioned in the *Salutation*. It is the best complement to, and commentary on, the *Salutation*: and it displays even greater clarity and brevity than does the *Salutation* in praising the virtues which put to flight the enemies of the spiritual life:

Where there is charity and wisdom,
there is neither fear nor ignorance.
Where there is patience and humility,
there is neither anger nor disturbance.
Where there is poverty with joy,
there is neither covetousness nor avarice.
Where there is inner peace and meditation,
there is neither anxiousness nor dissipation.
Where there is fear of the Lord to guard the house,
there the enemy cannot enter.
Where there is mercy and discernment,
there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.