A Prayer in Search of an Author

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Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, unity;
where there is error, truth;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in forgetting ourselves that we find ourselves;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

(Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi)

The spiritual value of a text is one thing. Its attribution to a particular author is something else. Wonderful pages of theology have been attributed to

Augustine, Bernard or Bonaventure, even though these presumed authors could not possibly have known them for reasons of time, place, or language. Such texts are called apocrypha and can be found even in the Bible.

The beautiful and well-known prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi belongs to this category. But before we rule out his authorship, it is only fair to see how it could have been attributed to him and why it no longer is. Many editions of the *Writings* of St. Francis are in circulation throughout the world, and an impressive number of medieval manuscripts contain these *Writings* in whole or in part. Yet we never find this prayer, either written or printed, in any early or modern collection. What is more, we are never provided with a Latin text, even though this (along with the Umbrian dialect) is the language in which Francis expressed himself.

Ever since the question of authenticity has arisen, this prayer continues to be attributed to St. Francis, scholarly caveats notwithstanding. Thus it may be of interest to publish the results—albeit provisional—of an investigation carried out separately by Father Damien Vorreux and myself. The documents alone weigh more than two pounds!

We shall examine in turn the dissemination of this prayer, which for convenience sake we shall refer to as the "peace prayer"; its possible date of composition; the problem of the *Souvenir Normand*; and finally some comments on the literary genre of the text.

Dissemination of the Peace Prayer

The peace prayer is found almost everywhere today. It is prayed and sung in many languages and used by many religious groups. Professor Schulz, in a study we shall refer to below, lists over twenty versions. As with all widely-disseminated texts, there are variations and additions. These are due to a desire to express individual sentiments or to successive translations (when, for example, a French text is retranslated after the Italian version).

If today this prayer is officially accepted, so to speak, by the followers of St. Francis, the Scouts and Secular Franciscans adopted it years ago and made it one of their favorite prayers. Many Protestants and Anglicans regard it as *the* ecumenical prayer. Thus it appears in the Liturgy of Geneva under the name of St. Francis. It was adopted in 1922 by the Protestant Christian Union (a society founded by Pastor Jules Rambaud to promote peace between French and German Protestants). In 1925, Pastor Etienne Bach's Christian Movement for Peace made it its own, thus assuring its spread to other countries and religious confessions. We find it in the Dutch *Gebedboek*, while it also enjoyed great success in postwar Germany. That same year it became part of the liturgy of the Reformed Church of France, always under the name of Francis.

On the other hand, this attribution is not found in the L'Arche prayerbook (Lanza del Vasto), which contains a final petition: "Give us, Lord, peace, strength and joy, and grant that we may share these with others."

Tom Connally, an American senator, is said to have recited this prayer at a session of the United Nations in San Francisco. But no one has been able to find any record of this in the Acts of the International Congress.

It would be interesting to know the extent to which this prayer is known in Japan, America and Africa. One thing is certain: pilgrims to Assisi can find the complete text in five major European languages. There is also a partial Swedish version, but we have never seen one in Japanese, or lately, in Portuguese.

On the scientific level, we should point out that our prayer has been the subject of a study by Professor Frieder Schulz, *Das sogennante Franziskusgebet*, which appeared in the "Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie" (Cassel, 1968).

How can we explain the good fortune of so short a text? Father Damien Vorruex says: "Its rich content and simple form have contributed to its dissemination." We might add that surely the name of St. Francis must also count for something.

When did this prayer for peace appear, seeing that it is not found in any early or modern collection of the writings of St. Francis? Can we assign a date to it? That will be our next task.

Date of Composition

We should begin by saying that, with the documents we have at present, we cannot go back with certainty beyond 1913. In January of that year, the *Annales de Notre-Dame de Paix* (Tinchebray) published our prayer, giving as a reference *La Clochette*. This magazine has disappeared completely; not a single copy is to be found. Thus we cannot say whether it contains any reference to some author or other periodical as its source. While this looks promising as a first lead, it does not take us very far, and so we must try another. How far will it take us?

The Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, carried the following item in its issue for January 20, 1916: "The *Souvenir Normand* has sent to the Holy Father the text of several prayers for peace. Among them we are pleased to reprint one that is especially addressed to the Sacred Heart. Here is the text in its touching simplicity." This is followed by the Italian text of our prayer—the one which is called "A Simple Prayer"on the holy cards sold in Assisi today. Could that name have come from *L'Osservatore Romano*?

Then there is the mysterious *Souvenir Normand* mentioned by the Vatican paper. We will need to come back to it. But we should note that *La Croix* (Paris, Febraury 3, 1916) tells us that on January 25, Cardinal Gasparri had written to the Marquis de La Rochetulon et Grente, founder and president of the *Souvenir Normand*, to thank him for sending the prayer to Benedict XV. A few days later (January 28), *La Croix* reprinted the text from *L'Osservatore Romano*.

About the same time (our research does not allow us to be more exact), there appeared in Rheims, on the initiative of the director of the Third Order, Capuchin Father Etienne of Paris, a picture of St. Francis. On the back was the peace prayer with the note, "From the *Souvenir Normand*." One of Father Etienne's nephews, a religious who was received into the Secular Franciscans in Rheims in 1913, is still living today. He assures us that he was not familiar with this picture at the time. We have also looked through *Miettes Franciscaines* (Rheims), March 1911 to August 1914, without finding our prayer there. Thus it seems that the picture with the prayer is later than the publication of the text of the *Souvenir Normand* by *L'Osservatore Romano* and *La Croix*.

The prayer appears again in 1917 in a book by Msgr. Pons, *Face à l'épreuve* (Paris, Roblot). The only reference given is to the *Souvenir Normand*. In 1925, the *Vie Franciscaine* (vol. XI, p. 661) reprinted it with no mention of St. Francis. However, during this period, both Catholics and Protestants were reprinting the Rheims picture, but with the reference to the *Souvenir Normand* replaced by the words: "Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi." As a result, the attribution to St. Francis gradually won out over the *Souvenir Normand*. Yet it is there that we ought to find the origin of our prayer. Let us turn, then, to the *Souvenir Normand*.

The Problem of the *Souvenir Normand*

Since the lead from *La Clochette* turned out to be a dead end, let us abandon it and turn instead to the "Norman" lead we came upon in Rome. There are, in fact, at least two magazines with the same title. The Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris has in its Versailles repository a collection of fragile pages: the first sixty-two issues of a certain *Souvenir Normand*, published between April 4, 1897 and June 12, 1898. Apparently this is the entire collection. In any case, careful searching on our part has failed to find any other collection or even another issue. Since there is nothing in no. 32 to suggest the magazine's imminent demise, we may well wonder what happend.

Abbé Bouquerol, the editor of *La Croix de l'Orne*, also edited the *Souvenir Normand* in Flers. But it was written in Paris, at the Franciscan house on Rue Puteaux, by the famous Father Edouard Brière, who was born in Nécy (Orne)

in 1856, came to Paris in 1893, and died there in 1919. Head of the *Apôtre Laïc*, which passed away with him, he wrote promotional pamphlets for the Third Order. He was also interested in the social apostolate but does not seem to have founded whatever it was that existed for Normans living in Paris. Another Franciscan worked with him, a certain Father Arthur (Charles Frélaut), who died in Paris January 16, 1898, six months after the last known issue of the *Souvenir Normand*. This is probably nothing more than a coincidence. In no. 2 (10 April 1897) we read: "The purpose of the *Souvenir Normand* is to renew love for our native land among our compatriots living in Paris." The magazine was anti-German and anti-Semitic. It also contained polemical attacks against anticlericalism in the style of the times. Did it ever publish the peace prayer? We have looked through the entire Versaille collection without finding it.

At this point we may recall that in 1916 Cardinal Gasparri thanked another *Souvenir Normand* in the person of its president and founder, the Marquis de La Rochetulon et Grente. We know from personal correspondence that the marquis and a certain Jean Soudan from Pierrefitte founded a *Société du Souvenir Normand* during the belle époque. But we have no definite date. Rumor has it that these two individuals were widely regarded as eccentric and rather prone to hoaxes. Our correspondent wrote: "The purpose of the *Souvenir Normand* had nothing to do with concerns about pious practices inspired by St. Francis." Yet this is the *Souvenir Normand* that presented Benedict XV with "several prayers for peace," including the one that is of interest to us, seeing that it was to the Marquis de La Rochetulon that the Secretary of State sent the customary letter of thanks. Who could tell us which issue of this *Souvenir* (which cannot be found even in the Bibliothèque Nationale) contains the prayer later attributed to St. Francis? The two issues we have seen at the home of a Norman living in Paris do not have it.

One last option remains if we wish to keep at least the appearances of a medieval and Franciscan text. Do the style, ideas, and language of this prayer reflect the Middle Ages of St. Francis, or earlier?

Do Comparisons Offer Any Direction?

A specialist in the history of medieval prayers, Father Barré CSSP, wrote to us: "I do not feel, any more than Dom Leclercq, that the prayer...belongs to 11th or 12th century monasticism. I even thought it was much more recent, if not modern." Based on the three studies and collections mentioned below, we have the impression that medieval prayers were directed more toward personal salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and preservation from physical and moral harm. The point of view is almost always individual and very rarely social, except for generalized expressions of love. The following is a French

example from the 14th century: "Sweet Jesus Christ, Son of God, Redeemer of the world, defend me from the hands of my enemies, the path of sin, sudden death, false witnesses and evil danger."

The *Confessio Catholica* of John of Fécamp (11th century) gives a list of broad, universal intentions similar to those of the liturgy, but without the kind of contrasts or alternations found in our peace prayer. Peace was an object of prayer throughout the Middle Ages, which were a time of continual unrest. The following invocation is from the 14th century: "God of peace and mercy, grant peace and unity to your holy Church." (Could this be a reference to the Great Western Schism?) Here in full is a prayer taken from the *Petites Heures du duc de Berry* (Paris, B.N. lat. 18014, f°119):

> Savior Jesus Christ, most gracious Lord: if there is anyone who wishes me evil or does me harm, anyone who is my enemy or my persecutor, in your holy compassion pardon him, Lord, and grant him Paradise. And show me your holy mercy, so that, unharmed, I may overcome their power and with a noble heart pardon all who misjudge me. Thus may I receive and obtain from you pardon for all my sins. Amen.

We see here a concern to turn evil into good and thus merit to obtain mercy and eternal salvation.

What is striking in our peace prayer is the opposition between good and evil. Nothing prevents us from seeing it as an example of *psychomachia*, the combat between the vices and virtues so frequently found in the Middle Ages. Francis himself gives us a model of it in Admonition XXVII, and it occurs considerably earlier in St. Anselm and John of Fécamp. Is the following list any less powerful than that of St. Francis?

> My God, my mercy, I beg you through your beloved Son to grant me all the works of mercy and zeal for piety. May I show compassion toward the afflicted, aid the destitute, assist the poor, counsel those who go astray, comfort the sorrowful, relieve the oppressed, restore the poor to health, strengthen the weak, forgive debtors, pardon those who have sinned against me, love those who hate me, render good to those who are evil.... (St. Anselm).

Aelred of Rievaulx follows the same line of thought in his *Oratio Pastoralis:*

> Teach me...sweet Lord, how to restrain the restless, comfort the discouraged, and support the weak. Teach me to suit myself to everyone according to his nature, character and disposition, according to his power of understanding or his lack of it, as time and place require, in each case, as you would have me do.... I pray you, strengthen what is weak in them, spurn not their frailty, heal that which is diseased, give joy for sorrow, kindle what is lukewarm, establish what is insecure in them.... [M]ake me, your servant, a good and faithful steward in respect to all, a wise and fair distributor, a sensible provider. [tr. R. Penelope Lawson]

The thought is so similar that, despite the statements of Fathers Leclercq and Barré, we do not really see any discrepancy between these authentic medieval formulas and our prayer.

What then are we to make of the appeal to William the Conqueror that has been put forth several times? It is *L'Osservatore Romano*, January 20, 1916, that mentions him, and since it certainly did not imagine this detail, we may assume that it was suggested by the *Souvenir Normand*. If we search in the old accounts concerning the Duke of Normandy, Oderic Vital's biography in particular, we find nothing resembling our text except for stereotyped expressions such as a preference for peace rather than war. An edifying about-face for a warrior on his deathbed! As long as we cannot get our hands on the *Souvenir Normand* from which our prayer is taken, we cannot be more precise about its connection to the William the Conqueror.

As for its connection to St. Francis, let us return to that before we conclude. From the viewpoint of the history of the text, our prayer has nothing to do with the writings of St. Francis. From the viewpoint of its literary genre and content, it resembles something that medieval piety and a Franciscan soul could have produced. Let us compare it to some *Sayings* of Blessed Giles of Assisi:

> Blessed is he who truly loves and does not wish to be loved; blessed is he who fears and does not wish to be feared; blessed is he who serves and does not wish to be served; blessed is he who conducts himself well toward others and does not wish others to conduct themselves well toward him.

We have already mentioned its similarity to Admonition XXVII of St. Francis.

There is more. In their study of the manuscripts of the *Writings* of St. Francis, Fathers Esser and Oliger give some passages that are definitely not from Francis but have been found among his works. They are apocrypa or *spuria*. There is a prayer in German, apparently from the 15th or 16th century (p. 119); another, also late, that may be from an Augustinian monastery (p. 57). Then there is this text, which is not a prayer but which we can keep because of its literary similarity to our prayer for peace (p. 49):

> Words of St. Francis to his brothers: As long as the state of the church shall be without holiness, earthly princes without justice, people without devotion, young girls without chastity, the rich without mercy, married women without modesty, religious without obedience, so long shall the end of the world draw near....

As a prophecy, this is obviously bizarre. But in its manner of listing oppositions, it is exactly like the literary genre of our text. The attribution of these words to St. Francis is mistaken (the manuscript dates from the second half of

the 15th century), but the spirit is there. Throughout his life, Francis went about doing good where there was evil, not in a mechanical or Manichaen way, but through a life totally conformed to the mystery of Jesus, who replaced the death of the cross with the life of the resurrection and the death of sin with the life of grace.

Conclusion

The importance of our study should not be exaggerated, given the limited historical and doctrinal significance of such a short text. But while concluding that the peace prayer is not from St. Francis of Assisi—although admitting (provisionally) that it could be medieval in origin (subject to reassessment if the *Souvenir Normand* is ever found)—we must say that what is most important and of interest to us is its deeper meaning, no matter who its author or what its origin. Of course we would like to know. But even as we stop referring to it as the Prayer of St. Francis, let us continue to make its words, sentiments and actions our own and love it with a deeply Franciscan heart.

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