

## Prayer Before the Crucifix

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*En busca del sentido*

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**T**he first prayer composed by St. Francis that we know about is a very short one. It dates from the years 1205 and 1206, when Francis was still searching for his vocation and struggling with temptations and doubts. Although the prayer has often been called “the prayer of Francis’s conversion,” that does not mean it was composed at the very moment of his conversion. He had often prayed in much the same way before he put his petitions in the very words that have come down to us:

Altissimo glorioso Dio,  
illumina le tenebre de lo core mio  
et da me fede drecta,  
sperança certa e caritade perfecta,  
senno et cognoscimento,  
signore, che faça  
lo tuo santo e verace commandamento.

We can still read this text in medieval Italian in a manuscript preserved at Oxford. The same manuscript informs us that the prayer was quickly translated into Latin “so that it can be understood throughout the world and so be more fruitful.” It is remarkable that Francis’s first and last prayers are precisely the ones that have reached us in his mother tongue, his last prayer being the *Canticle of Brother Sun*. In fact, these two prayers, along with his *Canticle of Exhortation to St. Clare and her Sisters*, are the only works by Francis in his native language that have come down to us. All his other

writings were set down in Latin, but not very good Latin, which means that Francis dictated them in Italian and they were then transcribed in Latin by a brother acting as his secretary.

In English, the prayer reads:

Most high, glorious God,  
enlighten the darkness of my heart  
and give me correct faith,  
certain hope and perfect charity,  
sense and knowledge, Lord,  
so that I may carry out your holy and true commandment.  
(Amen).

### Background

For a long time, Francis had not been his usual self, the out-going, happy-go-lucky leader of the young men-about-town in Assisi. Now, he went around sunk in thought and even his sleep was disturbed by nightmares. He did not yet know exactly what he wanted to do with his life or what was happening to him. Only one thing was clear to him: his dreams of knighthood had vanished, and he had not found the happiness he had sought as a warrior-knight.

His imprisonment in Perugia and his resulting illness had made him introverted and uncharacteristically pensive. Added to that, things were not going well for him at home, mainly because he did not want to fall in with his father's ambitious plans for him. Peter Bernardone, an astute businessman with social aspirations, was baffled and enraged by his son's indecision and lack of ambition.

In reality, Francis had already broken away from home and had no intention of even attempting to do what his father wanted. Instead, he began to look for lonely places in which to give himself up to prayer, he avoided the company of his friends and, finally, he went to live with the lepers. There, among these outcasts of society, he underwent a complete reversal of attitude. What he had found nauseating before, now became pleasant; his former revulsion at the very sight of a leper turned into compassion. Now, instead of spurning the lepers, he treated them tenderly and found great joy in serving them. When he had finally overcome his repugnance and embraced a leper, he gained new self-knowledge and discovered undreamed-of possibilities within himself.

On the far-off horizon of the future, he caught a fleeting glimpse of something waiting for him that was quite different from war and commerce, although as yet he could not see exactly what it was. The important thing, however, was that he was now completely open and ready to change his way of life. Recent events had given him new standards to judge by, new values which he had not thought much about before or which he had even found abhorrent. That is to say, he had found God and the lepers; and the discovery changed him so much that he now may have had a presentiment that he was being called to a higher life.

It was in this open, searching, receptive frame of mind that... he was walking one day near the church of St. Damian, which had nearly fallen to ruin and was abandoned by everyone. Led by the Spirit, he went in and fell down before the crucifix in devout and humble supplication; and smitten by unusual visitations, he found himself other than he had been when he entered. While he was thus affected, something unheard of before happened to him: the painted image of Christ crucified moved its lips and spoke. Calling him by name it said: "Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin." Trembling, Francis was not a little amazed and became almost deranged by these words. He prepared himself to obey and gave himself completely to the fulfillment of this command (2Cel 10a; cf. L3S 13).

"He gave himself completely to the fulfillment of this command..." In these words of Celano we can see an allusion to the prayer we are studying, in which Francis also mentioned a "command." In any case, Celano's narrative describes exactly the context in which we must place the prayer. Unfortunately, Celano has not provided us with the text of the prayer. But, along with other prayers by Francis, it has come down to us in several old manuscripts which point out that the Saint used to recite this prayer frequently in his native tongue and that he taught his companions to say it, too.

If we are to understand this prayer, we must remember a second fact: Francis *said it before the Crucifix at San Damiano*.

This "crucifix" is really an icon measuring 2.10m by 1.30m, which is now kept at the Church of St. Clare in Assisi. The painting, glued to a backing of walnut wood, is of the Umbrian school and shows a markedly Syro-Byzantine influence, and was painted in the twelfth century by an unknown artist. The colors are bright and vivid. Christ is not depicted as the "man of sorrows"; on the contrary, His appearance is majestic, with eyes that

seem to look into the viewer's soul. His arms are outstretched but with no sign of strain. He is standing and not hanging from the cross. Furthermore, the icon depicts the whole Paschal mystery—the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, as well as those who were connected in any way with the crucifixion, along with the angels of the Resurrection and the women outside the empty tomb. The apostles, too, are shown, gazing at Christ ascending into Heaven.

In the upper section of the Crucifix, the gate of Heaven appears, with the hand of the Father held out in blessing over His Son, who has done His will, "being obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). The Father's hand, outstretched in blessing, may be an allusion to the Holy Spirit, who is called "the finger of God's right hand" (*digitus paternae dexteræ*) in the sequence of the Mass for Pentecost. If that is so, then the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all represented in the icon. Given the intensity, scope and expressive power of the Romanesque Crucifix of San Damiano, it is not at all surprising that Francis, who was so sensitive, should have found himself captivated by it. He liked to visualize thoughts and ideas, to clothe them in images, and his eyes and ears were keenly alert to the colors and sounds around him. No wonder, then, that he felt drawn to the Crucifix and indeed challenged by it.

The central figure, Christ the Lord, drew his whole attention: it came alive for him and moved him deeply. He felt that Christ in person was looking at him with appealing, yet penetrating, eyes and outstretched arms, inviting him to reflect on the thought: "Francis, do you not see that my house is falling into ruin? Go, and repair it for me!" (L3S 13c).

Thomas of Celano and the *Legend of the Three Companions* relate the event as miraculous, and St. Bonaventure stresses the element of miracle even more by telling us that the voice made its appeal, not once only, but three times (LM II:1a). However, the truth is that there is no need to resort to miracles to emphasize the importance of the event, which is even more significant when we view it on a natural level.

There are situations in which certain words assume a special meaning for us; there are moments when we understand clearly something that had eluded us until then, encounters in which we reach a better knowledge of ourselves, pictures that leave an indelible impression on us. We sometimes say: "That means a lot to me. It says something to me. It *speaks* to me."

So, we can understand Christ's words to Francis in San Damiano in this sense. The imposing icon of San Damiano, the image of Christ with His penetrating glance, could have impressed Francis so much just when he was searching for his vocation in life that he was stirred to the depths of his being and almost irresistibly drawn to follow the Crucified for the rest of his life. He felt himself so profoundly affected by Christ on the Crucifix that he had little choice but to respond by doing as he was asked.

### The Structure of the Prayer

The prayer is one of supplication and reflects the situation in which Francis found himself. It consists of two invocations and two petitions. The first invocation contains two adjectives with which Francis recognizes that God is "most high" and "glorious." He kneels before this glorious God with his heart shrouded in darkness, and he knows that enlightenment can come only from Him who is Light. Therefore, he asks God, first, to "enlighten the darkness of (his) heart"; and second, to "give (him) correct faith, certain hope and perfect charity, sense and knowledge" (*sensum et cognitionem*, as the Latin text says).

The first petition, "enlighten the darkness of my heart," has fewer words and is more general in meaning than the second, "give me correct faith..." The thought then moves from the negative ("darkness") to the positive ("faith... hope...").

The first invocation, "Most glorious, high God," is longer than the second, which simply says, "Lord," but which leads on to the whole point of the prayer, Francis's desire to discover and do the will of God.

Thus, the prayer has an internal dynamism of its own. Kneeling in the presence of his Lord and God, Francis acknowledges that his heart is shrouded in darkness and doubt. Every faculty of heart and mind that he has comes to him from God alone and must lead him back to God. Although he was troubled in mind and assailed by doubts, he did not simply ask for faith, hope and charity. Instead, his whole prayer is directed towards one aim, being able "to carry out (God's) holy and true commandment."

This prayer has much to tell us about the way Francis thought. He begins by calling upon God, and he ends with the purpose of carrying out God's holy commandment. The two pivotal points of the prayer are "give" and "carry out": God *gives* so that we can *carry out* His will. This structure is also found in some of Francis's other writings. In his *Testament*, he wrote:

“The Lord *granted* me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way..., and I *had mercy* on them” (Test 1f.): and the following verses of the *Testament* are on the same pattern. God grants and inspires: Francis listens and obeys (cf. Test 3-15).

### Meditation on the Prayer

*“Most high, glorious God”*

As Francis gazed at the majestic countenance of the Crucified in the icon at San Damiano, how else could he address God but as “*Most high*” and “*glorious*”? For him, the crucified Christ was God, and God is the Most High, even while enduring the humiliation of the cross. In the future, he would often address God in the same terms—“All-powerful, most holy, most high and supreme God, all good, supreme good, totally good” (LaudHor 11); “You are the most high” (BenBern 2); “All-powerful, most holy, most high and supreme God” (RegNB XXIII:1).

*The Canticle of Brother Sun*, too, begins with the words “Most high”: “Most high, all-powerful, good Lord” (CantSol 1). This phrase, “most high,” seems to span Francis’s whole life, for it stands at the beginning of both his first and last prayers. For Francis, God was, indeed, the Most High, and he saw and acknowledged God’s sublimity everywhere—on the cross, at Bethlehem and in the consecrated bread and wine. He found the Most High wherever he looked.

At the time when Francis said this prayer, everything had become a problem for him. But, we may ask, why could he not have thought things through for himself? Was it not up to him to reach a decision as to what he should do about his own future and his relations with his father? However, despite the fact that he was beset by such worries, he did not look to himself for solutions but turned his gaze to the Most High instead.

We, too, often find ourselves facing difficulties in personal relationships and in work, difficulties for which we have to find answers. When that happens, we may mope around, unable to see any way out. We are unable to look ahead but keep our attention fixed on our present situation alone. If that is the case, then we can help ourselves greatly by raising our eyes to God and saying quietly: “O Most High!” When we pray like this, we are acknowledging that there is Someone greater than us; that we are the smallest, the least brother or sister. And so we turn to Him who is the Greatest and confide in Him.

*"Glorious"*

The eyes of faith see beyond the pains and suffering of the Crucified. Because of his profound belief, the unknown artist who painted the Crucifix of San Damiano was able to show in his icon both Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Even on the cross, Christ is still the Lord, clothed in glory and majesty.

Basically, the whole task of our life of faith consists in contemplating Good Friday and Easter Sunday *together*, in bringing Sunday into the other days of the week. Because Christ, although crucified, is still resplendent with majesty, then, when suffering, sorrow and death shatter the comfortable routine of our daily lives, we must not allow them to plunge us into despair. Francis himself was an example of how joy can shine through weakness and bodily suffering. Even at the moment of his death, the majesty of God was manifested, for His Lord granted him the favor of dying with a psalm on his lips and his brothers around him.

*"Enlighten the darkness of my heart"*

In his invocation, "Most high, glorious God," Francis acknowledges God's majesty. All we can do when confronted with the inaccessible light of God is confess our own darkness. That is why the invocation "glorious" is fittingly followed by the plea, "enlighten the darkness of my heart." The word "heart" here means the very center of Francis's being, the darkness of his mind and emotions, his doubts and worries, his inability to see where he should go, his inner turmoil, his alternating between desolation and consolation.

But enlightenment can come only from God. Francis's first petition was to share God's glory, to partake of His light. That is what he needed most urgently—to be transformed, for when God's light shines on us, we see our lives very differently and much more clearly.

*"Give me correct faith, certain hope and perfect charity"*

Kneeling before the light-filled Crucifix in the little church of San Damiano, Francis had come to realize how dark his heart was. The real cause of this darkness was his inability to shake himself free of the world and to surrender himself to the Father, as the Crucified Christ had done. Hence, he prayed for virtues that would be a suitable response to His Lord's sacrifice on the cross. He asked for the three theological virtues, the basis and constituent elements of the Christian life. By faith, we surrender

ourselves to God, as did Abraham: by hope, we look beyond ourselves; and by charity, we give up the very core of our being in answer to God's love for us.

We are all seeking love, and we grow and become better when we love and are loved. Our love is perfected in self-surrender to others. This is the *perfect charity* that Francis asked for. By praying for *correct faith*, he may have been distancing himself from the many heretical movements of his day. The Cathari had settled in the valley of Spoleto and were confusing many people with their teachings. There were also wandering preachers who went from town to town preaching penance, so that the average man or woman did not know who or what to believe. In this state of affairs, Francis was asking for light to guide him to choose the true faith and to remain in it. Perhaps the wording of this section of his prayer was influenced by the petition in the Roman Canon of the Mass: "for all those who hold and teach the Catholic faith that comes to us from the apostles." At any rate, in his *Prayer before the Crucifix*, we can already see his resolve to remain true to the Catholic faith, a resolve which would figure prominently later in several of his writings (RegNB II:2, III:4; Adm 26; 2EpFid 32-36).

His prayer for *correct faith* is one we can all profitably say today, exposed as we are to such a variety of opinions. General belief in God can no longer be taken for granted and, still less, belief in the Catholic faith. We also run the risk of presuming that our own opinion is the only tenable one, yet we are in danger of taking seriously the latest fads in religion. The petition, "Give me correct faith," can preserve us from over-confidence in ourselves and from being unsettled by the latest popular beliefs.

For some time, Francis had pursued his own mirages. He had dreamed of knightly armor, weapons and deeds of daring-do. But he had also listened to his conscience and, as a result, had begun to adopt a different ideal. Now, searching for this ideal, he asked for *certain*, sure *hope*, a hope which was far superior to his former ambition to achieve fame and glory in battle. This was a hope which would remain unshaken because it was founded on the Lord. In future, God Himself was to be his assurance of success.

Francis also specified the type of charity he sought by using the adjective *perfect*, that is, complete charity. In this petition, we can hear an echo of his encounter with the lepers which led to such a radical re-direction of his life. As he would later recall:



And the Lord Himself led me among (the lepers), and I had mercy on them. And when I left them, that which had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body (Test 2f).

Francis's dedication to helping the lepers made him see and feel in a way that was totally different from anything he had experienced before. When he was stammering out his *Prayer before the Crucifix*, he was still moved by these new experiences. He continued to be surprised at himself and to wonder where he had found the strength to overcome his loathing and embrace the horribly disfigured leper at the roadside, kiss him and clean his purulent sores. For Francis, the answer was the cross, Christ's sacrificial self-surrender. So he asked for the strength to enable him to continue what he had just begun, helping the lepers.

But he was well aware that he could never do it by himself: he knew he needed charity, which would enable him to see his neighbors in a new light and give himself to them. For that, he required a charity that would help him to be re-born and begin to live a new life. That is why he asked for an increase in charity, for a charity that would become more and more perfect.

Francis was to retain all his life the grace he asked for at this stage of his conversion. In contrast to the many fanatical heretics of the time, he kept and defended the One True Faith. His gift of renewed hope allowed him to appear confidently before the bishop and even before the Pope. This hope helped him to bring new life to the poor and the sick; and even at the hour of his death, it filled him with lively confidence and trust. *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, which he had his brothers sing as he lay dying, was an expression of his universal, *perfect* charity—his love of God; of his fellow humans, healthy and ill; his love for sinners and for those who forgave others. It was, in fact, a love which embraced all creatures and transformed heaven and earth for him. And not long before his death, this perfect charity helped to reconcile the Bishop and mayor of Assisi, who had hitherto been bitterly estranged.

*"Sense and knowledge"*

Francis had prayed first for the basic virtues, the theological virtues. What he had next asked for concerned, instead, his intellectual powers, for he requested sense and knowledge (*sensum et cognitionem*). These terms can be understood in several ways. *Sensus* refers to the *senses* and also, more generally, to feeling or *sensitivity*. Thus, the prayer can be translated:

Give me the *sensitivity* to understand your commandment; let me feel or tangibly experience what you want me to do. Make me sensitive to you and to my fellow-creatures. Make me receptive to your call and aware of the petitions, the often-silent petitions, of others. Grant me the grace to keep my senses always alert to understand the "sense" or meaning of my life.

*Cognitio* ("knowledge") means the capacity to understand and recognize, and it implies perception and intuition. So, Francis was asking to be able to recognize the right path to follow and to understand God's plans.

Therefore, by using the words *sense* and *knowledge*, Francis was alluding to his whole person, body and soul. We should carry out God's commandment with heart and mind, body and soul, with all our strength. But we cannot do this by ourselves. Francis acknowledged our poverty in this respect, our dependence on God. Therefore, he cried out, "Lord!" True *sense and knowledge* can come only from God. As regards the virtues, we are also beggars standing before God, but beggars who can hold out our hands with complete confidence and ask for—

— enlightenment of heart,

— faith, hope and charity,

— sense and knowledge.

*"To carry out your holy and true commandment"*

As he concluded his prayer, Francis did not ask for anything for himself. The whole purpose of his last petition was to be able to live his life according to God's commandment; never to forget God, never to plan his life without taking God into account. In his search, the young Francis hoped for everything from God. He surrendered himself totally to God and asked only "to carry out (His) holy and true commandment." Francis could not doubt or question this commandment, for he saw that it was *holy*, since it came from God. Therefore, he was always ready to carry it out, and he did not stop at saying so but immediately began to act upon it.

As he knelt before the Crucifix at San Damiano, his deep distress turned into compassion for the Crucified. Until then, he had been preoccupied with his own inner darkness, his anxiety and indecision. But after this, his suffering found a clear point of reference and a definite meaning: he would extend his charity, first, to the lepers and then broaden it to include everyone, by living

... among people (who are considered to be) of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside (RegNB IX:2).

He would suffer with everyone he found in desperate circumstances because he would see in them the suffering Savior.

Compassion, suffering with the Crucified, would in future determine the path Francis would follow. Compassion is much more than Christian sympathy. Francis would become so detached from self and so filled with compassion for the Crucified that Christ would imprint His own image on his body towards the end of his life. That moment in San Damiano, when Francis realized that he should devote his life to compassion for the Crucified, was a turning point in his life. It was then that he took the first step along the path that would lead to the stigmata, the outer sign of his identification with Christ. The road that led to Mount La Verna began at San Damiano.

The Three Companions point out this connection:

From that hour his heart was stricken and wounded with melting love and compassion for the passion of Christ; and for the rest of his life he carried in it the wounds of the Lord Jesus. This was clearly proved later when the stigmata of those same wounds were miraculously impressed upon his own holy body for all to see (L3S 14a).

### **Practical Exercises**

Although the *Prayer before the Crucifix* was personal to Francis and was composed in a very special situation, we can all use it as a model prayer. We can say it especially in moments of doubt or when we have to make an important decision. It would also be appropriate as a prayer with which to begin the day.

I. Look closely for some moments at the Crucifix of San Damiano, that is, focus your attention on the "glorious" Crucified, as He speaks to you: "What am I saying to you? Carry out the commandment that I am giving you today, now." You can also turn your silent visual contact into a petition: "Most high, glorious God...", or, especially in a group, make it a canticle or a proclamation in the following form:

1. "Contemplating your image, we ask to become like you...."
2. "Contemplating your creation...."
3. "Contemplating your cross...."
4. "Listening to your words...."
5. "Following in your footsteps...."
6. "By your Resurrection...."

II. There are many details to be seen on the Crucifix of San Damiano. You can trace the story of salvation, from the Crucifixion to the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost. Or else you can pause to consider each of the various people involved.... Finally, look at the radiant countenance of the "glorious" Christ. While contemplating it, say or sing the invocations in number I above.

III. In an early printed account of the life of St. Clare, we are told that Francis used to say this prayer every day.

In fact, it is probable that Francis loved to repeat the prayer over and over again, following the custom of the ancient desert fathers.

This method of praying which the monks and fathers of the desert used was called *ruminatio* ("ruminatio," "pondering"). It consisted in saying over and over, slowly and without any haste, an aphorism, or a short prayer, or a verse from the psalms. The *Prayer before the Crucifix* can easily be adapted to this way of praying. Repeat the prayer several times slowly, word by word, petition by petition. Then start again from the beginning, repeating the whole prayer and concentrating fully on it. Adjust your slow phrasing of the prayer to the rhythm of your breathing.