

## **Bare-footed in the Foot-prints of Jesus -**

### **The Christ-Experience of Francis and how he followed Him**

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#### **1. Irreligious Youth in the Centre of Assisi, and a God who is far away**

Why is a church-going young man around 1200 living 'as if there were no Christ'? And this in the centre of a city that could boast of more than a dozen churches and monasteries in a population of some 2000 inhabitants? The answer may perhaps be found on the doorway of the Cathedral Church of San Rufino that was just under construction at that time: It shows the common idea of God around 1200 AD. The Romanesque God, Ruler of the World, on His throne, flanked by the sun and the moon, immeasurably high above all else. What has this image of the All-powerful world-dominating Christ to do with the everyday life of the Assisi citizens, with their mundane worries, business plans, festivals and dreams for a successful career?

Francis, 'the most human of all the saints', writes about the first half of his life that he had lived 'without Christ'. Raoul Manselli translates into modern language what Francis expresses in his Testament by 'cum essem in peccatis'. No doubt, the young merchant carries out the religious duties appropriate to the merchant middle-class, goes to Mass on Sundays, takes part in the religious processions and also goes on pilgrimage to Rome with his extended family. But, in retrospect, for him his faith seems to have no influence on his life, his actions and his decisions. Religion is a matter for the clergy, of whom there were many representatives in the town, yet these are hardly keeping pace with the rapid changes that time is bringing. But performing liturgical acts does not necessarily mean that there is a living spirituality behind it!

God shows himself infinitely patient with the young man, who enjoys living on the sunny side of life for a number of years. The "Highest" wait until people seek him of their own accord. And often he waits in unexpected places for the one who is seeking him. But of this more later.

#### **2. War - Dungeon - Illness:**

##### **The way towards the One, who "enlightens everything"**

Only when the ambitious young man, spoilt by life, stumbles over the daring plans of his ambition, his soul awakes. At the age of twenty he experiences a dreadful debacle in the Battle of the Tiber, he is taken prisoner, spends one year in the dark dungeons of Perugia, gets ransomed, and then turns seriously ill. When he gets back on his feet after yet another year, his shaken life leads him to search for a deeper meaning.

"Business as usual" in the large-scale enterprise of his father, rides to the surrounding markets and evening festivities during the following years, give the impression of regained normality. Unnoticed by his friends and family, the young merchant, nevertheless becomes involved in a movement of a twofold search. Francis first of all begins to discover silence. On the edge of the town he finds caves. Here he can give room to his thoughts, to his experiences and the questions of his soul. During quiet hours he presumably also starts to learn that prayer that finds a first breakthrough in San Damiano two years later „Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart! Give me true faith, certain hope and perfect charity, sense and knowledge that lead us through everything, and a love that excludes no one..." (PrCr)

The Church as an institution and religious community remains outside this search: Francis searches alone, although Assisi is not lacking churches, clerics, and spiritual centres. Neither sacred rooms nor the Bible nor priests accompany the young man in his quest for meaning. Dark caves attract him - places which apparently correspond to his inner world: „Enlighten the darkness of my heart". The silence during the long nights of captivity and in his illness still threatening, now becomes the ally of the young townsman.

#### **3 „The Highest has led me among the Smallest"**

##### **Key experiences of a long search**

Simultaneously to discovering the tranquility in caves and woods outside of town, the young merchant also became aware of the negative sides of his sunny Assisi. So far the lively centre of the small town had been his world: the town houses of the leading guilds, the noble shops in the centre, the piazza itself.

Even today a female tourist will hardly enter the dirty alleys of lower town – narrow, winding “vicoli”, shady, almost sunless backyards, and the houses of the working-class families.

Francis who inwardly longs for a new joy of life and meaning, discovers the workers and the unemployed people, the beggars and the poor of Assisi. And again and again he is drawn to the people on the edge and in the shadow side of the town. Excursions uphill into silence give inner peace to the young Bernardone, and excursions down to the poor for whom he sets his own table, lead him through two years of increasing inner turmoil. Both search movements prepare the way for two decisive key experiences.

Francis actions become more radical: During a trip to Rome the young man dissociates himself from the cruelty of his guild by flinging his trip money indignantly down to Saint Peter’s grave and secretly exchanging his clothes with a beggar to beg in front of San Pietro himself. In the lowlands below Assisi he meets a leper whom he loathes at first, but then he embraces him and finds “a bitter thing changed into sweetness”. Unexpectedly the merchant finds new joy of life at the very bottom, where he feels “Led by the Highest”. Few weeks after the encounter with the leper, Francis prays in the half ruined church of San Damiano. He speaks words that have accompanied his search for months. For the first time they allow an influence of ecclesiastical annunciation and, at the same time, they lack any hint of an incarnational image of God: The seeker understands God, in the Romanesque sense, as the ruler of the world above all. And from him he expects faith – hope – charity.

*Most High Glorious God,  
enlighten the darkness of my heart.  
Give me right faith,  
sure hope and perfect charity.  
Fill me with understanding and knowledge  
that I may fulfill your command. (PrCru)*

Taking a look at the Church as an institution and religious community it can surprisingly be stated: Francis still makes his way alone, without spiritual accompaniment and also without counselors. For years the reciting asks for God directly, for the sources of light, and for a new sense of life. He apparently does this without the mediation by ministers.

Meals with beggars and hours in silence have gradually prepared the way for the first breakthrough. It can be dated back to spring 1206 and it takes place in two steps within a few weeks. The encounter with the leper at the town gates has opened up the merchant, who is still appearing on horseback, to the King of the World, who had walked barefoot on earth. Francis describes the decisive experience in his testament with equally short and solid words:

*I lived for twenty years, as if Christ had not existed. It seemed to me repugnant and bitter, to see lepers. But the Lord Himself has led me amongst them, and in the encounter with them my charity awakened. That which had seemed to me bitter was changed into sweetness of body and soul. After a little while I left the bourgeois world. (Test 1-3).*

During the time of his search, the merchant had so far been praying to a high God. When meeting others down in Assisi, he gradually realises that the Highest acts surprisingly: at the very bottom. “God Himself has led me among the lepers” (Test). The embrace of a leper opens up the seeker for the mystical encounter in San Damiano. God appears to him there – as a friend of the lowest - unexpectedly at eye level. Giotto has illustrated this surprising encounter at eye level in a masterpiece: the wealthy man finds himself in front of the bare Christ, the well-off man (with 8 houses in Assisi) in front of God hanging in the rain, - and overwhelmed he falls to his knees.

In the upcoming conflict with his own father, the Damiano Cross teaches Francis to take a look at Jesus’ heaviest conflict with human beings. Threatened by his father, Francis lives near San Damiano for weeks, where most likely the local priest takes care of him and probably also offers an initial companionship. On the table cross Francis discovers the hand of the Heavenly Father, leading his son – the “ Son of Man” – into His light through rejection, hatred and suffering. Only a few weeks later Francis will confess the Father of Jesus as his own: the only Father in and above this world. “From now on I will no longer say “Father Peter Bernardone” but „Our Father who art in heaven“(Comp 20). [...].

Decisive threshold experiences in winter 1205/06 within few, moving months mark a way of manifold discoveries. The „Highest“ leads among the Smallest, responds through the bare-footed son on earth and

becomes visible as Father of all mankind. The discovery of Jesus' humanity on earth turns the Romanic ruler of the world into the „God at eye level“ - a God who reveals himself to the young merchant outside of town and its churches, at the edge of society, among the poorest, in silent caves and inside a Church ruin.

The experience of the one Father of all Mankind and of the one Son, who becomes brother to the Smallest, leads Francis to a radical brotherly and sisterly view of the world. He becomes more revolutionary than the Republic of Assisi itself and transverse to Church-hierarchic thinking. [...]

At the age of 16 Francis having experienced during the urban revolution that the commune order is breaking with patriarchal rules and developing democratic ideas, in 1206 his image of humanity and the world becomes more radical evoked by a moving experience of faith. God Himself chooses the downward career; the Highest makes Himself equal to the Smallest. [...].

The social and clerical revolutionary aspect of this spirituality shows its consequences compared with the patriarchal model of Benedict leading the hierarchic Church till this day. Francis possibly gets to know the renowned prologue of the Rule of St. Benedict already in spring of 1206 right after his disinheritance during service of the Benedictines of Vallingegno, at the latest, however, as a hiking Brother regularly enjoying the hospitality of monks. During his last years he portrays a remarkable contradistinctive version in a letter to his own Brothers:

#### ***The Rule of St. Benedict***

*Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of thy loving Father.*

#### ***Francis to the Order:***

*Listen, You Sons of the Lord, and my Brothers, pay attention to my words, Incline the ear of your heart and obey the voice of the Son of God. Observe His commands with your whole heart and fulfil His counsel with a perfect mind.*

Whereas for Benedict of Nursia the monastery is a school of love and perfection „beneath abbot and rule“, Francis will be wandering about, in search of a community of faith in the discipleship of a brotherly Son of God.

## **4 vita evangelica et apostolica**

### **The life of the friends around Jesus**

Francis interprets the Jesus' mission to the disciples and their vagrant life with the rabbi as layman into his own time and Umbrian world. Inspired by the sending of the disciples (Matthew 10), he also sets off empty-handed and attempts to bring peace to houses and alleyways, to help lepers, to get people to notice God's devotion in everyday life and to live the Gospel. Although he experiences rejection and condemnation, the first companions will soon join him.

Thereupon Francis reacts with astonishment and perplexity. „ And after the Lord gave me Brothers, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel“ (Test). This is a familiar scene: Instead of becoming a teacher to his companions himself, he and his companions ask their one and only common Lord. Three times they open the Bible at random in the small marketplace church of San Niccolò de Plathea. This indicates little knowledge of the Bible: But how should Francis be a reader of the Bible, poor and without books, as he is? What might appear to be fundamentalist proves subsequently to be a deeply religious and also circumspect and realistic translation of the biblical encounter with Christ within the own Church. One year later the mightiest pope of the Middle Ages – a brilliant theologian – will confirm a simple rule of life from mere Gospel quotes and permit the amateurish Brothers the simple preaching “around the world”.

The first Rule begins with the striking and programmatic sentence: „The life of the Brothers is this: to follow the doctrine and the example of our Lord Jesus Christ“ (Reg 1). Before Francis discovered the footsteps of Jesus, he had discovered the Cross. The meditation of the passion scenario is told at the San Damiano Cross from the cock's crow on Easter morning to Ascension and demonstrates God's humanity to the searching merchant: a poor and simple rabbi on earth, with companions and female friends and with love also for his enemies. After two years as a hermit Francis discovered his own way by living the vagrant life just as the disciples around Jesus. With the companions who join him he accepts the Galilean life of the friends around Jesus. Just as Jesus wandered through villages and towns to retire to quiet places

and onto hills at night, the early Franciscan movement combines „city and silence“, times committed to people with times in „quiet places“.

## 5 In the footsteps of the Son of Man:

### Evangelic freedom

The following story, which Jordan of Giano tells in his chronicle is an impressive illustration how Francis and his early brotherhood transcribe the Gospel into their own reality.

*It is the year of the Lord 1219 for the chroniclers of the crusaders. It is late autumn, and in Palestine the harvests have been brought in. Francis wanders through the Holy Land with the permission of the sultan, who had become his friend in September. Moved and awestruck the Poverello will have wandered the route that had seen the "footsteps of his Lord". One day at noon – Jordan of Giano tells us – Francis sat down at table somewhere in Judea or Galilee.*

*As already many times before he and his companions Pietro di Cattaneo, Elias and Caesar of Speyer had been invited by someone. This time, the hosts might have been crusaders, a simple family, maybe also Muslims, or Maltese in a pilgrim's hostel. As they were sitting together, a Brother disturbs the lunch round – he is sweating and agitated and has the restless wish to find Francis. He has come from Italy in a great hurry to report to Francis what has happened there in September. Gregorio of Naples and Matteo of Narni whom the Poverello had appointed as his proxies had called the most experienced Brothers of Italy for a chapter.*

*Among other things this chapter had established severe dietary rules. The Brothers could not seriously only just obey the fasting rules that apply for all laymen: no meat on Wednesdays and Fridays all year! The Brothers could by no means take second place behind the orders that had become old and easygoing! What is the norm for monks should be the minimum for the Lesser Brothers. Thus the chapter decided on rules for fasting and abstinence that clearly specified the time of prohibition for meat as well as dairy products. Francis is startled by the report of the hurried messenger. He certainly loves poverty, more radical than anyone else, but for him it is certainly no ascetic doing, no effort where the sacrifice can be weighed in grams or be measured in what has been conserved. And his reaction is just as telling as it is liberating: he calmly asks his companions who are sitting perplexed in front of their plate filled with meat and who do not know whether they are allowed to continue eating, what kind of advice the Lord had given to the disciples, when he had sent them through this country. Luke had passed on the following (10, 5-8): "Eat what is set before you"! Just as the poor who gratefully accept what is given to them, who are not used to choosing... And who are hopefully able to enjoy what the kindness of the people is giving to them.*

The Brother's reaction - who continues eating - fasting rules or none - is path-breaking and speaks for the basic decision of his spirituality: the Gospel, not any norms have to be followed and only the human life of Jesus alone is the yardstick and not the rules of monks however holy they may be : the rabbi is the sole Lord and Master, - He, who was no ascetic, who loved life and showed himself so much as the friend of mankind, that he multiplied wine and that the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say 'Here Is a glutton and a drunkard' (Mt 11,19).

Evangelic poverty is not about measurable sacrifice or self-imposed achievements. It is far more radical and more liberating at the same time. Jesus' rule to the rich young man confronts the first basic step. He, who would be prepared to do anything, is encouraged by the Rabbi: "Let go of everything! Give what you have to the poor and follow me with empty hands!" Francis experienced that the promise is fulfilled for all those who will follow this rule: And whoever has observed this rule may be filled in heaven with the blessing of the Most High Father, and who even gives up his home, family, profession, and career, who follows Christ with free hands and feet, with body and soul and with a free heart, releases a lot of things, however, he will receive hundredfold!" [...] This is the confession of a kind of poverty that is far more daring than the poverty of the monks, who live a regulated and secured life in the concealment of a convent: unsecured and with empty hands poverty of the disciples leads the Poverello through Italy not knowing in the morning where he will get some bread at noon and where to lay down at night. A kind of poverty that completely puts its trust in the graciousness of human beings and the care of God, he wanders as a Brother to France and Spain, yes even to Egypt and to the Sultan's army camp – with the belief of empty hands and abiding to the Easter mission to the disciples, „to proclaim the Gospel to all creatures to the boundaries of the earth“. Even alleged enemies will then turn into friends as is the case with Sultan Malik al Kamil.

## 6. "Pleasing Christ and following his footsteps"

### Following Him with the imagination of Love

Francis values, contemplates, and internalizes the Gospel to such an extent that it shows him the „footprints“ of Jesus in every life situation and the voice of the “Son of God” becomes audible. (Ord). The Word of God is not just simply to be known and studied, but wants to bring Christ back to the world within us and through our lives (Letter to the Faithful. In the case of emergency even the only available Book of Gospels is to be given away if there is no other way to help a suffering person. In winter 1220/21 Francis asks the person in charge of the „Exemplary Congregation“ to give the only issue of the Book of Gospels of the Portiuncula to the impoverished mother of two brothers so that she can sell it to relieve her distress. As Christ would certainly be much more pleased if the brothers would work his word in practice instead of only reading it and to contemplate: “I was hungry and you fed me”.

The willingness to energetically follow Jesus’ advice to the rich man becomes the criteria for new callings on the way of Franciscan fraternities. In 1223 resulting from its liberating and radical self-experience, its final rule includes the following:

*If anyone wishing by divine inspiration to embrace this life should come to our brothers, let him be received kindly by them. And if he be firmly resolved to accept our life, (...)let the minister speak to them the words of the holy gospel (cf. Mt 19-21) he is to sell all his goods and distribute them all to the poor. There is to be no other guideline but the Gospel. The imagination of love shows every Brother how to please Christ best. To be a true follower of Christ develops through a personal friendship with Christ.*

Brother Leo has been on the way with the Poverello for ten years and he is his closest companion. Although no longer a beginner, he coaxes him for more precise instructions to follow Jesus. In awkwardly scribbled words Francis answers as “his Brother” and, at the same time, in a sensible and motherly manner. Yet their jointly chosen Evangelic freedom does not require any guidelines. Francis is on his guard to take on the role of leader or master:

*“Brother Leo, wish thy Brother Francis health and peace! Thus I say to thee, my son, as a mother, that all the words, which we spoke along the road I would briefly sum up and counsel thee in this word: and if later thou shouldst wish to come to me for advice, that I counsel thee thus: In whatever way it seems better to thee to please the Lord God and follow His footsteps and poverty, you should do so with the blessing of the Lord God and my obedience. And if it is necessary for thee for thy soul’s sake or other consolation, thou wishest, Leo, to come to me, come!*

The letter that Leone carries in his habit for more than 50 years reflects the freedom of the original Franciscan way of life. Self-responsibility links with solidarity. No Brother and no rule, no person or no duty may interfere between Christ and those who follow him out of love. No laws or guidelines by another person, but one’s own imagination know best how the disciple pleases his Master and the friend pleases the friend. The Poverello encourages the companion to be led again by the imagination of his own love to follow Jesus.

## 7 „forma vivendi“

### Essence of the Franciscan Form of Life

The oldest text that has been handed down on Francis turns into the superb essence of a spirituality that unfolds through the discipleship of Christ within intensive and rich relationships. In the early days of their companionship Clare asks the Brother to write down her form of life in a few words. As a result the Poverello puts down in one simple sentence what he admires about San Damiano around 1212. Later on he will transfer this view of Christian life in all its liberty and all its abundance onto each form of Christian life and also unfold it in his Letter to the Faithful.

*Moved by love Francis wrote down the form of life in the following way:*

*“Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High King, the heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel. I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers to always have that same loving care and solicitude for you as (I have) for them” (Form of Life of Clare of Assisi, Chapter VI. 3-4).*

The inner structure of this form of life becomes clearer when the somewhat complicated sentence is parsed into its active subjects and is then also sketched down:

In late writings this early spirituality – lived by Clare’s Sisters and described by Francis – marks the way for all faithful of any lifestyle. In his Letter to the Faithful the relationship with Christ unfolds in a three-fold intimacy:

*“Oh, how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them, since the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them and He will make His home and dwelling among them. 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 to our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. 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 pure and sincere conscience and when we give birth to Him through a holy manner of working, which should shine before others as an example. (2 LtF 48-53)*

## **8. Incarnation**

### **Amazement at the “Earthliness of God”**

At the latest in 1220 the foot-prints of Jesus also lead the wandering Brother to Bethlehem – with heart and soul. His fight against the crusade fails in the encampment of the Christian alliance; on the other hand he wins the friendship of Sultan Malik al Kamil on the other side of the Nile. The Sultan allows the Poverello to freely move to Palestine. Back in Europe the Brother looks for ways at Christmas time to also persuade the Italian peasants to come to the shepherd fields of Bethlehem: with their hearts and senses. The Christmas at Greccio was to go down in history. Francis had staged the nativity of Jesus so vividly thus creating the tradition of the nativity celebration. He had spent the cold Advent season of 1223 with some of the companions in the hermitage of Greccio: it consisted of rocky caves above the valley of Rieti, with a great view onto a lovely plain and onto the Sabine Mountains north of Rome.

Quiet times following weeks on the road help to reflect and to deepen experiences. At the same time they give space for drawing water from deep sources and for the solitude with God. Just as his Rabbi, Francis wants to go to God when he comes from the people and to come from God when he goes to the people. (see Mark 1, 21-39). The biographer begins the report on the memorable Christmas celebration with the comment that the Saint had *“consistently meditated the words of the Master and had never lost track of his doings. Especially his humility in the incarnation and his love even unto death had been deeply imprinted in his memory.”* Amazement at God’s path on earth prompts the Poverello two weeks before Christmas to prepare a special celebration together with a close friend, a person of noble rank from the region. It is to remind the Brothers and the people of the love and humility of God in a sensuous way. In fact the people, who gather with torches in the Holy Night, find a newborn child in diapers, lying on a straw bed between an ox and a donkey. During the Eucharistic Mass at the animated Christmas manger Francis recites the Gospel, and the cave, the hay, the animals, the tiny child, and the people crowded in the cave give a unique colourful touch to it. At that time, so the story of the moving celebration closes, *“the child Jesus has been newly born in many hearts”* (1 C 84-87).