

## St Francis of Assisi – Blessed are Those Who Mourn

*In the name of the Father...*

In his Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord describes progress in the spiritual life by the ascending Beatitudes, works of the infused virtues under the impulse of the Holy Ghost imparted through his Gifts.

The first three Beatitudes articulate progression in the well-ordered love of self, culminating with *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*,<sup>1</sup>i.e., those who mourn for sin, sin's tragedy not being realized fully until its blinding effects have been purged.<sup>2</sup>

Of this Beatitude, St Augustine notes: *knowledge corresponds to those who mourn, who ... have discovered by what evils they are held chained which they ignorantly have coveted as though they were good and useful... to ...the loss of the highest good.*<sup>3</sup>

Aquinas concurs: *Right judgment about creatures belongs properly to knowledge. Now it is through creatures that man's aversion from God is occasioned... those... who do not judge aright about creatures... sin by placing their last end in them and lose the true good.* St Thomas further notes: *man's beatitude consists, not in considering creatures, but in contemplating God. But man's beatitude does consist somewhat in the right use of creatures and in well-ordered love of them.*<sup>4</sup> It is not that God's creation is evil, but rather that we can be too enamored of it.

The third beatitude, then, wherein is mourned disordered attachment to creatures to the loss of God, prompting acts of reparation, is characterized by the Gift of *knowledge* and the virtue of *penance*.<sup>5</sup>

St Francis of Assisi embodied this third Beatitude. Like the Baptist after whom he was named - Francis being an acquired name - he knew the calamity of sin, disordered attachment to creatures leading to ruin – exile from Eden.

Known for his rigorous asceticism, Francis was a model of *penance* and mourning for sin. His biographer St Bonaventure wrote: *Considering the words of the Apostle, "They who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its concupiscences... he began to exercise... severe discipline over all his sensual appetites... He continually discovered new ways of exercising abstinence... to punish... the rebellion of the flesh.* St Bonaventure records that Francis... *called his body Brother Ass, saying that it was to be laden with heavy burdens, beaten with many stripes and fed with poor and scanty food.*

---

<sup>1</sup> [Mt 5:4](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Ps 40:12](#)

<sup>3</sup> [St Augustine, On the Sermon on the Mount, Book 1, Chap 3, 4](#)

<sup>4</sup> [ST IIa IIae 9, 4, c & ad 3um](#)

<sup>5</sup> This third Beatitude also throws into greater relief the first Beatitude of spiritual poverty and detachment.

St Bonaventure further noted that Francis, gifted with knowledge of the vanity of creatures and man's propensity to sin on account of them ... *sought with all his power to lead the brethren to austerity of life*. Indeed, he relates Francis commanding his fellow friars to drag him through a town to a stone where condemned malefactors would be exhibited. There, despite his illness and the intense cold, he preached with such great force and energy that the assembled crowd, though marveling at the strange spectacle, were pierced with compunction.

Francis' preaching, then, was like the Baptist's – demanding true conversion of life rather than mollifying modern sensibilities or championing pseudo-concerns. Knowing man's penchant for disordered attachments to creatures, thirteenth century authentic Franciscan preaching was that of the first century prophet of wrath, not the twenty first century prophet of mercy:<sup>6</sup> *the kingdom is at hand – repent,*<sup>7</sup> not: *climate change is at hand – recycle*.

Francis, however, was not dismissive of God's creation. Bonaventure records that Francis... *having withdrawn one day to a certain solitary place to mourn over his past life in bitterness of heart... was filled by the Holy Ghost with extraordinary gladness, being assured of the full remission of all his sins*. The mourner had been comforted: in a measure, through austerity, God had restored this exiled son of Adam to that Edenic harmony of man both with God and the rest of creation. Comparing Francis to... *Adam in his state of innocence*, Bonaventure noted that Francis ... *had attained to such a degree of purity that his flesh was subject to his spirit and his spirit to God in a wonderful harmony and agreement, and all creatures were thus in marvelous subjection to his will and command*.

Thus, Bonaventure relates that – like the Psalmist: *my eyes shed streams of tears, because men do not keep thy law*<sup>8</sup> - Francis' continuous tears of contrition caused a malady of his eyes requiring cauterization: *The surgeon was ... sent for, who placed the iron ... in the fire. [Francis] consoled his shuddering body as if it had been a friend, saying to the fire: 'Oh brother fire, the Most High has created thee glorious, mighty, beautiful and useful above all other creatures. Be thou propitious and healthful to me at this hour. I beseech the great Lord who created thee so sweetly to temper thy heat that I may be able to endure it.'* Having made the sign of the cross upon the red-hot iron, it was plunged deep into the tender flesh. We asked about the pain, Francis answered: *Praise the Most High my brethren for I tell you truly that I have neither felt heat nor suffered from the burning iron*.

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/09/13/vaticaninsider/eng/comment/pope-francis-mercy-and-the-pelagian-problem-zWxS6HqNGDSjgeyqkH6xAl/pagina.html>; <https://onepeterfive.com/a-strange-notion-of-mercy/>; <https://romalocutaest.com/2017/09/15/mr-walfords-ode-to-francis/>

<sup>7</sup> [Mt 3:7-10](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Ps 118\(9\):136](#)

St Bonaventure also relates that... *Francis came upon a great multitude of birds sitting upon the branches of a tree, singing aloud. Then he said to his companion: our sisters the birds praise their creator; let us therefore go into the midst of them and sing the canonical hours to the Lord... But, because for the noise they made, the friars could not hear each other, the holy man said to the birds: my sisters the birds, cease your singing until we have fulfilled our duty in praising God. And the birds hushed at once and remained silent until the Office was fully said, when they received permission from the man of God to resume their song.*

Fr Thomas Crean writes of Adam's knowledge in the Garden: *Our first parents... were conscious of God in way which surpasses all experience on earth... [U]ntil we see God face-to-face, all our knowledge of Him is mediated by creatures... [Our first parents] would have had a clearer knowledge of God the creator who is reflected in all his works... [T]his antelapsarian knowledge of God is... in a certain sense midway between the knowledge of our present state and the knowledge of heaven where God is seen in his essence. Adam did not reason from God's effects to God's existence as we have to; rather... he saw God in his effects although not according to his essence...*<sup>9</sup>

That is, Adam's Edenic knowledge was not purely inductive but in a measure intuitive. And in some way, now so was Francis'. Francis knew that creatures were not an end in themselves: they existed to praise their Creator. Neither a pantheistic paean nor an eccentric eco-warrior's epithet, and which closed with a dire warning for those who die in mortal sin, at the very end of his life Francis composed his famous *Cantic of the Creatures*, rhythmically aspiring that God be praised through his creation: *Laudato Si mi Signore*. One author has noted: *Though physically blind, he was able to see more clearly than ever with the inner eye of his mind. With unparalleled clarity, he perceived the basic unity of all creation and his own place as a friar in the midst of God's creatures. His unqualified love of all creatures, great and small, had grown into unity in his own heart. He was so open to reality that it found a place to be at home in his heart and he was at home everywhere and anywhere.*<sup>10</sup>

Francis had once fancied himself a future troubadour: he day-dreamed of singing the praises of fair ladies. Now, this worn out, poor man of Assisi, who so keenly knew the ultimate vanity of creatures, who had mourned and been comforted and in a measure restored to that Edenic harmony, who knew the true worth and purpose of creation, now in harmony with and through that creation, he could sing the praises of the Creator.

*In the name of the Father...*

---

<sup>9</sup> [Fr Thomas Crean OP, The Perfection of Our First Parents](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Wikipedia: Cantic of the Sun](#)