

# REDISCOVERING THE SIMPLICITY OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

## Introduction

When I received the message from Debbie asking me to present to you a conference on “Rediscovering the simplicity of St. Francis of Assisi”, one thought immediately came to my mind: you must be simple. But as you all know, it is not easy to be simple, worse still when we are adults. As a child, Anthony of Exupery made simple drawings of boa constrictors swallowing elephants. No adult could say at a glance what that was. The little Prince alone was able. So, may God help us to be simple enough to rediscover the simplicity of one who incarnated simplicity itself.

Rediscovering the simplicity of St. Francis is synonymous to rediscovering St. Francis himself. Simplicity is a virtue that can substitute and even summarize some virtues with which he is particularly identified: minority, poverty, humility, seraphic purity, etc. But Francis was also a simple person in the common use of the term. Put on the cultural balance of his time, he would have weighed more on the side of uncultured. The Latin qualification for such persons, which is often translated by “Simple”, is “idiota”; an uncultured person. Francis was probably a deacon, but certainly not a priest. He was a son of a merchant who could barely read and write Latin, with lots of mistakes, as experts would tell from his writings. Many times, he was openly treated as such, either as complement or as despise. Both his admirers and his opponents considered him “idiota”. Others had to write for him what he was supposed to say in the presence of the Pope.

An episode is narrated in the Italian translation of the writings of St. Francis which I was unable to locate in the Three-volume English Translation by Regis Armstrong and others. St. Francis once preached a sermon to the inhabitants of the little city of Terni in the presence of the Bishop. When he had finished, the Bishop appreciated him in these words: “From when the Lord began founding and building His Church, He has never stopped sending holy persons who sustain it by their word and example. And in these last days, He has chosen to enlighten it by this little poor man, simple and illiterate.” St. Francis loved this and, in the sacristy, told the bishop that it was the first time he was being so well honored since the bishop had rightly given glory to God and not to a creature. (LP 103). It could well be said of St. Francis: “*God has chosen that which is foolishness by the world’s reckoning, to confound the wise; God has chosen that which is weak by the world’s reckoning to confound the strong.*” (1Cor 1:27). No person is too small, or too simple for God to use to renew the Church.

Simplicity was supposed to be the hall mark of the friar minor as we read from this narration by Thomas of Celano: “*He once said to his companion: ‘I would not consider myself a Lesser Brother unless I had the attitude which I will describe to you’. And he said: ‘Here I am, a prelate of the brothers, and I go to the chapter. I preach to the brothers and admonish them, and, in the end, they speak against me: ‘an uneducated and despicable man is not right for us; we do not want you to rule over us. You cannot speak; you are simple and ignorant.’ So in the end I’m thrown out in disgrace, looked down upon by everyone. I tell you, unless I hear these words with the same expression on my face, with the same joy in my heart, and with the same resolution for holiness, then I am in no sense a Lesser Brother.*” (2Cel CVI). (This passage somehow re-echoes the passage on perfect joy). Rediscovering the person of St. Francis is very important for our personal and collective renewal. I will propose to you here elements from his writings and from his biographies.

## 1. The Simplicity of St. Francis from his writings.

It is important to return often to the writings of St. Francis for our revision of life. We can know much more about a person by listening to him/her for a few minutes than by listening to others speak about him/her for hours. In his writings, we listen to Francis speak to us. He was simple communication, both orally and written. Since learned persons would always want to explain things better even the very simple ones, and often end up making them more difficult to understand, St. Francis wrote in his Testament: *“And I strictly command all my cleric and lay brothers, through obedience, not to place any gloss upon the Rule or upon these words saying: ‘they should be understood in this way.’ But as the Lord has given me to speak and write the Rule and these words simple and purely, may you understand them simply and without gloss and observe them with a holy activity until the end.”* (Test. 38-39). There is no better way to rediscover the simplicity of St. Francis than to go back to his writings.

i. Take the Rule of life, for example; both the Earlier and the Latter Rules. The Rule of life of every Franciscan group is simply the holy Gospel. St. Francis writes in the Testament: *“And after the Lord had given me brothers, nobody showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I had to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel. And I had it written down in few words with simplicity, and the lord Pope confirmed it for me.”* (Test. 14). The earlier Rule of the Friars Minor, the Rule without the seal or Regular non-bullata is clear proof of how St. Francis simply took the holy Gospel for his rule of life. In fact, almost every phrase in it either springs directly from the Gospel or is backed by the holy Gospel or some scriptural text. Biographers testify that when the group was growing in numbers, when their rule was not yet officially approved, some people, and amongst them brothers, kept insisting that they should adopt one of the earlier monastic Rules: the Rule of St. Augustine, or of St. Benedict.

The author of the Legend of Perugia narrates an incident that most probably occurred at the Chapter of mats of 1221 in the presence of Cardinal Hugolino the future Pope Gregory IX and 5000 brothers. They asked the Cardinal to persuade Francis to follow the advices of the learned brothers and to allow himself sometimes to be guided by them. They made reference to the Rules of Saint Benedict, St. Augustine and St. Bernard that have such and such norms for a more ordered religious life. Francis to all present and to the hearing of the Cardinal: *“... my brothers, God has called me to walk the way of simplicity and He showed it to me. I do not therefore want that you list to me other Rules, neither that of St. Augustine, nor that of St. Bernard nor of St. Benedict. The Lord has revealed to me that it is His will that I be a mad person in the world.”* (LP 114; FF 1673). The Rule of life was then supposed to be simple. In fact, Both Francis and Clare lived most of their life without any officially approved Rule in hand. Theirs was a daily going from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel.

ii. Let us take a second example, the Letter to all the faithful which is the charismatic foundation and official prologue of the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. That could well be a sermon of St. Francis made into a letter to all. It is simple and clear on two points. On the one hand, those who love the Lord and do penance, and Receive Holy Communion and do good works are blessed. On the other, those who do not do penance and do not receive Holy Communion and live in vice and sin are cursed. There is no beating about the bush in some theological and philosophical attempts to explain how and why. St. Francis spoke and wrote simply, aiming at the human heart.

From the start of his conversion, Francis preached penance in very simple terms. His preaching solicited the conversion of his first companions. In approving the movement begun by Francis, Pope Innocent III gave them permission to preach penance. While Dominic and his companions went in for serious studies so as

preach the Truth, Francis and his brothers opted for very simple preaching, more by example than by words. Both lay brothers and clerics could preach. (cf. Rnb XVII). Here is what he says in his Rule: *“I admonish and also exhort the very brothers that, in their sermons, their words should be pondered and chaste, for the help and the edification of the people, announcing to the faithful vices and virtues, punishment and glory in brief discourses, because while on earth, the Lord spoke in brief terms.”* (Rb IX,3).

We find a model of Franciscan sermon in the First Rule, XXI.

*“And this or similar exhortation and praise, all my brothers, when it so pleases them, can announce to every category of people, with God’s blessing:  
Fear and honor, praise and bless, thank and adore the Lord God almighty  
in the Trinity and in the Unity,  
Father and Son and Holy Spirit, creator of everything.  
Do penance, bear worthy fruits of penance, because we shall soon die.  
Give and you will be given, Forgive and you will be forgiven;  
And if you do not forgive people their offenses, the Lord will not forgive your sins.  
Confess all your sins.  
Blessed are those who die in penance,  
because they will be in the Kingdom of heaven.  
Woe to those who do not die in penance,  
because they will be sons of the devil whose work they do,  
and they will go to eternal fire.  
Keep away and abstain from every form of evil and persevere in good until the end.”*

It is simple and clear; scripture-based, no philosophical arguments nor theological developments. Francis and his companions did not always use words in preaching to people. The brothers who went on mission among Muslims were given two lines of action in the Rule: *“The first is that they make no conflicts or disputes, but be subject to every human creature for love of God, and confess to be Christians. The other is that when they see that it so pleases the Lord, they can proclaim the Word of God so that they may believe in God Almighty Father and Son and Holy Spirit ... and be baptized and be made Christians, since, if one is not reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”* (Rnb XVI,6-7). On the other hand, he would use words to flowers, fields, birds and animals inviting all to the praise of God. It takes a child to do this.

iii. Let us take a third example from the Prayers. Jesus taught the disciples to be simple in the prayer for the basic reason that God loves them and knows what they need even before they ask, (Cf. Mt 6,8). Then He taught them the “Our Father”. Many Church fathers have written on the greatness and depth of this prayer. Pope Benedict XVI says that it is rightfully called “the Lord’s prayer” not only because it was taught by Jesus, but more so because it was Jesus’ very own prayer, his way of talking to the Father, his personal secret which he revealed to his disciples. As simple as it may seem, church fathers held it already that there is no other prayer we can possibly formulate which is not already contained in the Lord’s Prayer.

In the Rule, the Lord’s prayer is a substitute for the Psalms. The lay brothers, who were generally illiterate, had to say it a specified number of times, depending on the Hour of the Divine Office. (cf. Rnb III; Rb III). He writes in the Testament: *“We clerical [brothers] said the office as other clerics did; the lay brothers said the Our Father.”* (Test. 18). In the paraphrase of the Our Father, St. Francis has left us a treasure of his

meditation on the Lord's prayer. It is not a dry and magical formula to be recited, but rather a way of filial intimacy with God. No follower of St. Francis can excuse himself for not praying with the Church on grounds that he/she is illiterate, or has no breviary. Franciscan prayer has been generally described as affective prayer, or prayer of the heart. Monastic tradition insists on melody in psalmody. St. Francis, on the other side, says to the brothers: "*The clerics (must) say the Office with devotion before God not concentrating on the melody of the voice but on the harmony of the mind, that the voice may be in harmony with the mind, the mind truly in harmony with God.*" (LOrd 41).

## 2. The simplicity of St. Francis in the Early writings.

The early writings or hagiography present to us St. Francis through the eyes of his contemporaries. His contemporaries were particularly marked by his simplicity. It is not easy to remain simple when we are famous and in authority. Thomas of Celano, St. Bonaventure, Assisi Compilation, Legend of Three Companions, etc, all present to us many facts about St. Francis that would have otherwise been lost if these documents were not written. In his second work, Thomas of Celano dedicates some six chapters on holy simplicity: chapters 142-147. Other passages narrate the simplicity of his joy, the simplicity of his behavior even in the presence of great church authorities like bishops, cardinals and the Pope, the simplicity of his relationship to creatures etc.

i. Let us take for example the simplicity of his joy. Pope Francis invites us to embark on a process of new evangelization marked by evangelical joy. He says: "*The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of those who encounter Jesus.*" (EG n°1). In the Italian version of the Franciscan Sources, coordinated by Ernesto Caroli, we find in the *Legenda Perugina*, a vivid description of the joy of St. Francis:

*"From the moment of his conversion till the day of his death, Francis was always very hard with his body. But his highest and passionate task was that of possessing and conserving in himself spiritual joy."*

He used to say: "*If the servant of God will be preoccupied to habitually have and conserve interior and exterior joy, which springs from a pure heart, the demons will not disturb him in anything, for they will say: 'given that this servant of God remains joyful in tribulation as in prosperity, we find no breach through which to get into him and cause him harm.'*"

One day, he reproached a companion of his who was wearing a long face; Pope Francis would say a face of bereavement. He said: "*Why are you showing up in this way the sadness and anguish of your sins? It is a private matter between you and God. Pray that in His mercy, he may give you the joy of salvation. But in my presence and in the presence of the others, take care to show yourself joyful. It is not convenient that the servant of God should show himself to his brother and other persons depressed and with a saddened face.*" (LP 97).

Such joy is not a matter of making useless jokes just to amuse people. St. Francis admonishes: "*Blessed is that religious who has no pleasure and delight except in the most holy words and seeds of the Lord, and with these, leads people to the love of God with gladness and joy. Woe to that religious who delights in idle and empty words and leads people to laughter with them.*" (Adm XX).

We all know St. Francis' description or test for perfect joy. It is not when things all go well for us, when we have progress and success in all we do, when we have all we desire and even more, when people esteem,

respect and honor us, when rights are respected or our authority recognized etc. that we have perfect joy. Comes the moment when everything and every person you could possibly hang on, seems to turn its back to you. When even your brothers and sisters despise you and reject you. *“I tell you, St. Francis concludes, if I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this.”*

ii. The simplicity of his faith: Jesus said *“truly I tell you, if you do not change to become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”* (Mt 18:3). Little children are a paradigm of simplicity. They have no difficulty in knowing the father, mother, brothers and sisters, and therefore their identity. When Jesus reveals to us that God is Our Father, it takes the simple heart of a child to accept this in all its depth and consequences. It is a new birth and a new identity which even Dr. Nicodemus could not understand. When Francis discovered the simple but real fact that God is our true father, he took off his clothes in public, handed them to his father and openly declared: *“Until now, I have called Pietro Bernardone, ‘my father’. From now hence forth, I can freely say ‘Our Father who art in heaven!’”* Francis thus rediscovered what we all are, through faith in Jesus Christ and baptism in the Spirit.

Just as in a family nobody chooses his/her brothers and sisters, in the same way too, children of God do not choose their brothers and sisters. St. Francis writes in his testament: *“And after the Lord gave me brothers, nobody showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I had to live according to the form of the holy Gospel.”* (Test. 14). Evangelical brotherhood is not a social status but a real relationship. Franciscan fraternities are based on this fact and not on ideologies.

Our times are highly marked by publications of scandals caused by some of us priests. This has thrown the priesthood in discredit in some contexts. Saint Francis has this to say about his faith in priests: *“Then the Lord gave me and still gives me such great faith in priests who live according to the holy Roman Church, because of their ordination, that even if they were to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them. And if I had as much wisdom as Solomon, and I came across poor worldly priests in their parishes, I will not want to preach against their will. And these and all others, I want to fear, love and honor as my lords. And I don’t want to consider any sin in them, because in them I discern the Son of God and they are my lords. And I do this because, of the Most High Son of God, I see nothing corporally in this world except his most holy Body and blood that they alone receive and serve to others.”* (Test. 6-10).

iii. Let us also consider at this point, what I would call the simplicity of Franciscan theology. A great preoccupation of theologians in the middle ages was how to explain the real presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. The response of St. Francis can be found in the First Admonition, entitled ‘The Body of the Lord’. It could be more indicative to caption this Admonition, “How can one see God?”. The answer of St. Francis can be resumed in the following way: God is Spirit, and therefore can only be seen in Spirit. Whoever sees Jesus, sees God. As those who saw his humanity and did not see nor believe in his divinity are condemned, so too are those today who see him under form of bread and wine, sanctified by His own words, and refuse to believe according to the spirit. In this form, He remains with his faithful until the end of the world. But how do we explain this? Other theologians have come up with terms like “Transubstantiation”. According to St. Francis, it is enough that the Lord said: *“This is my body and my blood for the new covenant, and whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”* This must be believed in all simplicity. The incarnation in perpetuated even daily in the Eucharist.

Cardinal Fulton J. Sheen, in his book entitled *The Eternal Galilean*, says that God reveals himself to two groups of persons: the simple and the wise. The simple are those who know nothing, the wise are those who know that they do not know everything or that what they know is nothing as compared to what they could possibly know. According to the cardinal, these two groups are personified in the Gospel narrations by shepherds and the wise men from the east. The first group was led to Jesus by the message of an angel, and the second by a star. They both recognized the Savior, and the King in the Infant of Bethlehem. What these two groups have in common is humility that opened them up to the greatness of God. On the contrary, the self-sufficient and conceited Herod and Scribes, who know even from Scriptures that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem, did not find him.

How one attends Holy Mass, how one receives Holy Communion, and how one behaves in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is a form of simple witnessing that speaks a lot to many. Not all of us can write theological treatises on the Eucharistic presence, but we can all witness to it by our way of participation at Mass, reception of Holy Communion and living.

**Conclusion:** After considering the simplicity of St. Francis in his writings and other biographies, which I invite all to familiarize with, here are some simple admonitions of St. Francis on simplicity:

He says: *“Blessed the servant who does not consider himself better when he is praised and exalted by people, than when he is considered vile, simple and worthless, for man is worth what he is worth before God, nothing more.”* (Adm. XIX). Bonaventure also testifies that St. Francis used to say often: *“Man is worth what he is in the eyes of God and no more.”* (LM VI,1). When a person makes a choice to live the Gospel in a radical way, especially as Francis and his early followers did, it is inevitable that people will consider him vile, illiterate and worthless. When one knows the riches he has left behind, when one is mocked at as illiterate simply because he is poorly dressed, who would not be tempted to react immediately and to prove that we are not really what the other thinks? Many of the brothers suffered that temptation. *“when you compare with others, there will always be persons greater than you and some less; says the Desiderata. The former can cause you unnecessary sadness and even envy. The latter can push you to vainglory. St. Francis indicates the way out of this trap: always consider what you are worth before God; that is what you are worth, and nothing more. Otherwise said, live in the presence of God.*

Francis says elsewhere: *“Let us not be wise and prudent according to the flesh, but we must rather be simple and humble and pure. ... We must never desire to be above others, but instead we should be servants and subject to every human creature for love of God.”* (2LF. 45-47). Let us observe in passing that this is not philanthropy in the secularized understanding of it. It is rather love of all as an expression of one’s preferential love of God. The Lord Jesus Christ says the greatest commandment is this: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. ... The second then is similar: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Mt 22:37-38). St. Francis’ love for creation as sung the canticle of brother Sun and as is well known to many, was because he perceived in the elements of creation something of the greatness and beauty and goodness of God. To secular atheist and philanthropists, Francis could say *“BRAVO!”* and then quote the words of Scripture: *“What good is it to man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?”*

Francis does not despise learning or the learned. When Francis says in the Testament: *“We were simple and subject to all”* it implies that things are no longer the same at the moment of writing. Francis personally

permitted Anthony to teach the brothers Theology, on the sole condition that this occupation doesn't extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion. (Cf. LAnt; Rb V,2). In his Testament, he calls on brothers to honor theologians and preachers. He writes: "*And we must honor and venerate all theologians and those who administer the most holy divine words, as those who administer to us the spirit and the life.*" (Test. 13). Nevertheless, Francis did not want the brothers to run after studies as if without that they would get nowhere. In what is generally considered to be the heart of the Franciscan Rule, he writes: "*And those who are not learned should not be preoccupied with it, but pay attention that what they must desire above everything else is to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy work, to pray Him always with a pure heart and to have humility, patience in persecution and in infirmity, and to love those who persecute us and reproach us and calumniate us ...*" (Rb 10, 8-10).

There is a saying that when the wise person points at the moon, the fool looks at the finger. St. Francis was a simple man who rediscovered the simplicity of the Gospel, embraced it simply, lived in simply but courageously and communicated it simply. Through him, many rediscover the simplicity of God One and Triune, and the beautiful simplicity of the faith that we all profess.