



ST. FRANCIS *of* ASSISI

The Reformer

VIDEO OUTLINE — PART I

- I. INTRODUCTION
 - A. Man of contradiction: simple and humble, yet a deeply troubling and unnerving figure
 - B. Represented back-to-basics evangelization with a return to the radicality of the Gospel

- II. EARLY YEARS
 - A. Born in 1182 in Assisi, son of Pica and Pietro Bernardone, a cloth merchant
 - B. Not a proficient writer; loved to sing, especially songs of French troubadours
 - C. Worked in his father's shop and liked fine clothes, money, and partying
 - D. Sought fame, joined battles, eventually imprisoned
 - E. Had a powerful dream where Christ asked him whom he would serve: the master or the servant
 - F. Back in Assisi, the things that used to satisfy him did not anymore

- III. CONVERSION
 - A. Began to give things away to the poor
 - B. Embraced leper and was filled with happiness
 - C. Radical detachment from goods of the world and attachment to the purposes of God

- IV. REBUILD MY CHURCH
 - A. In 1206 at San Damiano, a small church in ruins, Francis heard Christ speak from the Cross, telling him to rebuild his house
 - B. Sold cloth from father's shop to fund renovations
 - C. Put on trial before bishop and came to renounce father and declare total devotion to God as his only Father
 - D. Solely dependent on God's providence; begged for sustenance
 - E. Others began to join him, selling possessions to fund his mission

IV. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ORDER

- A. In 1209, along with twelve disciples, Francis went to see Pope Innocent III to get permission to begin an order
- B. Corruption rampant at the time; initially dismissed by pope
- C. Came back and was given permission after pope remembered a dream about *il Poverello* (little poor man) holding up the Lateran church
- D. Called order the “Friars Minor” as they were to take the lowest place
- E. Vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience



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THE CONVERSION *of* ST. FRANCIS

To understand something of Francis' adventure, it is necessary to begin with his conversion. Sources record different descriptions of this event, with notable variations among them. Fortunately we have an absolutely reliable source, which dispenses us from selecting among the different versions. We have the testimony of Francis himself in his testament, his own *ipsissima verba* ("the very words," as is said of Christ's words reliably reported in the Gospel):

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.¹

Historians rightly insist on the fact that in the beginning Francis did not choose poverty, and even less so pauperism; he chose the poor! The change was motivated more by the commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," than by the counsel, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me." It was compassion for poor people, more than the search for his own perfection, that moved him—charity more than poverty.

All this is true, but it still does not touch the core of Francis' conversion. His focus on the poor was the effect of the change, not its cause. The true choice was much more radical. It was not about choosing between wealth and poverty, nor between the rich and the poor, nor between belonging to one class rather than another. It was about choosing between himself and God, between saving his life or losing it for the Gospel.

There have been some who came to Christ out of love for the poor (for instance, in times closer to us, Simone Weil). There have been others who came to the poor out of love for Christ. Francis belongs to the latter group. The profound motive for his conversion was not social in nature but evangelical. Jesus had formulated the law once and for all in one of the most solemn and most authentic phrases of the Gospel:

If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt 16:24-25)

When Francis did the unthinkable and kissed a leper out of mercy, he denied himself in what was most “bitter” and repugnant to his nature. Francis did not go to the lepers spontaneously, by his own will, or because he was moved by human and religious compassion. “The Lord,” he writes, “led me among them.” It is this small detail that is the origin of everything.



HOW ST. FRANCIS REFORMED THE CHURCH

How was it that such an interior and personal event as the conversion of the young Francis launched a movement that changed the face of the Church of his time and has had such a powerful effect in history up until our own day?

We must look at the situation during that period. In Francis’ time, more or less everyone acknowledged the need for reform in the Church. Tensions and deep lacerations scarred the body of the Church. On one side was the institutional Church—the pope, the bishops, the higher clergy—worn out by perennial conflicts and by their very close alliance with the empire. It was a Church seen as distant, involved in matters far beyond the interests of the people. With them were the great religious orders, among them the Cistercians,

many of which flourished in culture and spirituality, thanks to the reforms of the eleventh century. However, many orders were identified with the great landowners, the feudal lords of the time, who were remote from the problems and the tenor of life of the common people.

On the opposite side, there was a society that was beginning to emigrate from the countryside to the city in search of greater freedom from different forms of servitude. This part of society identified the Church with the dominant classes from which they felt the need to free themselves. Because of this, they would gladly take sides with those who contradicted the Church and fought against her—heretics, radical movements, and groups, that preached poverty—while they sympathized with the lower clergy, who were often spiritually not at the level of the prelates but closer to the people.

There were, therefore, strong tensions that everyone sought to exploit to their own advantage. The hierarchy sought to respond to these tensions by improving its organization and suppressing abuses, both within its leadership (e.g., simony, concubinage of priests) and outside of it (i.e., in society). The hostile groups sought instead to bring the tensions to a head, radicalizing the conflict with the hierarchy and giving rise to movements that were more or less schismatic. All of them used the ideal of evangelical poverty and simplicity against the Church, turning it into a hostile weapon and making it something other than a spiritual ideal to be lived in humility.

We are accustomed to seeing Francis as the man sent by Providence, who picks up these popular calls for renewal, defuses the voltage of controversy, and brings many back into the Church. In this view, Francis is a sort of mediator between the rebellious heretics and the institutional Church. This is how his mission is presented in a well-known manual of Church history:

Given that the wealth and power of the Church was often seen as a source of grave evils, and provided the heretics of the time with arguments for the main accusations against her, in some pious souls the noble desire was awakened to revive the poor life of Christ and of the primitive Church, and thus be able to influence the people more effectively by word and example.²

One must be careful not to draw the wrong conclusions from the famous words of the Crucifix of San Damiano: “Francis, go and repair my Church, which as you see, is in ruins.”³ The sources themselves assure us that he understood those words in the rather modest sense of repairing the little church of San Damiano materially.

It was his disciples and biographers who interpreted those words—and rightly so, it must be said—as referring to the institutional Church, not just to the church building. He always kept to his literal interpretation, and, in fact, continued to repair other small, ruined churches on the outskirts of Assisi.

Even the dream of Innocent III, in which he is said to have seen the *Poverello* supporting the collapsing Church of St. John Lateran on his shoulders, does not tell us anything more. Supposing that the event is historical (a similar event is also related about Saint Dominic), the dream was the pope’s, not Francis’! He never saw himself as we see him today in Giotto’s frescoes. This is what it means to be a reformer by way of holiness: being so without knowing it.

If he did not wish to be a reformer, what then did Francis want to be and do? Here, too, we are fortunate enough to have the saint’s direct testimony in his testament:

And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do; but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. And I had this written down simply and in a few words and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me.⁴

He alludes to the moment when, during Mass, he heard the passage of the Gospel where Jesus sends his disciples: “He sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick. And he said to them, ‘Take nothing for your journey, no staff, no bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics’ ” (Luke 9:2-3).⁵

It was a dazzling revelation, the kind that gives direction to the whole of life. From that day onwards his mission was clear: a simple and

radical return to the real Gospel lived and preached by Jesus, by restoring in the world the way and style of the life of Jesus and of the Apostles. Writing the Rule for his friars, he began thus: “The Rule and life of the friars is this, namely, to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Francis did not build a theory on his discovery or turn it into a program for the reform of the Church. He accomplished the reform in himself, thus tacitly pointing out to the Church the only way out of the crisis: to come close to the Gospel again and to come close to the people again, in particular to the humble and the poor.

Francis did in his day what was intended at the time of Vatican II: pull down the bastions; put an end to the isolation of the Church and bring her back into contact with the people. One of the factors that obscured the Gospel was the shift from a service-based authority to one focused on power, which produced endless conflicts inside and outside the Church. Francis, for his part, resolved the problem evangelically. In his Order—and this was totally new—the superiors would be called ministers, meaning servants, and all the others friars, meaning brothers.

PRAYER *of* ST. FRANCIS

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
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 pardoning that we are pardoned;
it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What moved Francis to embrace the leper, which was an act most repugnant to his nature? (Matt 16:24-25; 2 Cor 5:15-20; Rom 14:7-8; Gal 2:20)

2. After his conversion, Francis dedicated himself to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. What are those? Why are they important? (CCC 2447; Matt 25:31-46; James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:11, 16-18)

3. How was the lifestyle of St. Francis and his Friars Minor similar to the lifestyle of the early Christian community? (Acts 2:42-47, 32-35; Luke 9:1-3)

4. Where did Francis' joy come from? How did it affect his evangelism? (1 Pet 1:8-9; Rom 15:13; CCC 736, 1832, 1829)

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. After his conversion, the material world did not satisfy Francis as it had before. Describe a time when you sought out something of this world (e.g., wealth, pleasure, power, honor), but when you obtained it, you were not as satisfied as you expected. How did you grow in spiritual wisdom through that experience?

2. Slowly pray the Prayer of St. Francis (found on page 7) and spend 5-10 minutes meditating on it and on its author. What comes to mind in terms of your own life?

3. Who are the “lepers” in your life? How do you serve them? What additional step can you take this week to love them more?

EXCERPT FROM POPE FRANCIS' ENCYCLICAL *Laudato Si'*

“Laudato si’, mi’ Signore”—“Praise be to you, my Lord.” In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.”

I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature, and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon, or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them “to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason.”

His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that “from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’”

Such a conviction cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.

What is more, Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness. “Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker” (Wis 13:5); indeed, “his eternal power and divinity have been made known through his works since the creation of the world” (Rom 1:20). For this reason, Francis asked that part of the friary garden always be left untouched, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow there, and those who saw them could raise their minds to God, the Creator of such beauty. Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.