Remembering Francis:
Understanding Lives and Modern Ages

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Preface

Preparing to preach a retreat was the reason why I began to write this book. My theme for this retreat was how to live Christian life in the modern age, from my perspective as a man who came late to Franciscan life, after a career as a scientist in academia and industry. This past gave me a special interest in faith and science and the world engendered when they were juxtaposed.

I started with the question of how modern science changes the way we talk about Christian faith, but I quickly realized that there was a lot more at stake. All aspects of modern life are, in one way or another, shaped by the culture of which modern science is an integral part. We very much need ways to make sense of science. We need a way to see science not in isolation, but embedded in a larger picture, one in which the human person is truly included.

Modern science has alienated us from the world of our immediate experience. The more we understand the world through science, the greater is the distance between experience and understanding. But what can we do about the consequences of our alienation from reality? Any doctor knows that without a precise diagnosis, treatment becomes a guessing game that might just as well harm rather than help the patient. The problem seems to have something to do with the place of the human person in a scientifically understood world. But this is rather vague, and we need to know much more about this problem before we can do anything about it.

Therefore, I have kept searching for a fresh way to talk about faith and science. The many that are currently used never quite seemed to get it. Some minimize the conflict between faith and science, emphasizing compatibility or complementarity or disinterested coexistence, like two sides of the same coin. Two non-overlapping magisteria, in the magisterial words of Stephen Jay Gould, whose verdict aspired to end a conflict by separating the parties. Yet, there are others who want the battle to be lost and won. They ask us to reject one so that the other can rule supreme. They may make a leap of faith, reasoning against reason that such a leap is the more spectacular sign of their faith. Others will do the opposite and embrace science alone, rejecting faith with a conviction reminiscent of faith.

None of these three options felt satisfying, which is why I kept looking for a truly Catholic way. I recognized the challenge of science to the way we understand our faith, but I wanted it to be constructively engaged. It seemed to me that I could do so by studying the Franciscan tradition. It turns the challenge of scientific understanding into an opportunity for conversion. But not conversion that leads one to turn away from reason and the rationality of science, but rather conversion to a comprehensive and original understanding of reason and rationality that opens our hearts to the love of God.

When I spoke about faith and science, I quickly learned something else. I found out how difficult it is to lead people towards seeing faith and science together, letting them see the tension without turning it into a conflict. So much of our thinking is shaped by the scientific culture that is so easily accepted as beyond questioning. Yet, it must be questioned to be understood. Making sense of science in a spirit of faith requires a change of mind about what science has to say about the world. This change of mind cannot be accomplished by nothing but logical arguments flawlessly laid out in meticulous detail. Such is impossible, as it is one of the foundational assumptions of our reasoning that are meant to be changed. Such change must be done very slowly through acts of persuasion, gently coaxing the reader from one to another point of view. It takes time and patience until the new point of view becomes attractive enough so that it is fully accepted. This requires slow convincing by story telling and occasional repetition of the principle points presented in different ways.

Since I now live by the Franciscan Rule, I am using a Franciscan story as my starting point, which is the Testament of St. Francis. I broke the text into five parts, and I focussed on one particular theme in each one. I found that the flow of Francis's thought guided me well, helping the parts of this series come together as a whole. What resulted from these reflections is the first part of this book. It is a Franciscan synthesis of how to look at our lives today, in a scientific-technological culture. It teaches us how to make sense of our lives by being inspired by the vision of Francis applied to our own time.

Then, the book continues with different stories and different actors: St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Bl. Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham are the most important ones. These were among early readers of the

Testament of St. Francis, the friars who lived in the century after Francis's death. In the second half of this book, I look at their insights. How did they reconcile their own knowledge of science with the vision of the founder of their Order?

They found themselves in a situation that invites comparison with today. Their generation's secular materialism was the philosophy of Aristotle. Just as today, their faith was not easy to reconcile with what was then accepted as the scientific truth about the world. They also lived in a modern age. Their social world also changed rapidly. They had come to a clearer awareness of personal rights of men and women, many of which were not given their due, and they sought justice for them.

We have much to learn from the intellectual work of medieval Franciscans and how they made sense of modern times. For the relationship between faith and science, you might even end up thinking that not so very much has changed. Then and today, it comes down to recognizing how science can be put into a bigger picture that is worthy of faith. Then and today, it comes down to the question of who it is whom we call a person.

Introduction

As intractable as the question seems for the living, the evidence for a life well lived is right before us when we gather to mourn someone's death. Like beauty, a life well lived seems impossible to define in abstract terms, but we know it when we see it. When we do, we are blown away by its significance. It resonates with us and with our hopes and dreams. It allows us to make sense of life and understand it and see its beauty. When it happens, we know that, indeed, here was a life well lived. It is what we all seek.

One such life well lived is the life of Francis of Assisi. Born in 1181 or 1182 to a father who was a wealthy cloth merchant, he aspired at first to success and status among the citizens of his hometown, Assisi. However, after being defeated and captured in one of the wars between medieval Italian cities, he abandoned these dreams of glory and set his life on a new path. One day at prayer, it was later said, he had heard the voice of God calling him to a new beginning that would renew and reform Christian life. Whatever it was that put him on this new path, the example of his life made him the founder of a new order of men who wanted to live life as he did: in the utmost simplicity, with nothing of their own, dependent on the charity of others and with nothing but the Gospel of Christ as their guide.

From the many ways of retelling his life emerged the memory of the man we now know as St. Francis, with the devotional cult that surrounds him. He continues to inspire us in surprising ways, considering how different from ours was his experience of life. He inspires us even while we live in a world that would have been incomprehensible to him. He became the patron saint of all those who are concerned with ecology, a very contemporary science, in an acknowledgment of the way he expressed a true understanding of nature.[1] This makes him a natural starting point to approach the relationship between faith and science today, when the scientific culture of our day seems to have turned nature into a mere resource, with little respect for the integrity of creation and the inherent value of each of its creatures.

This makes St. Francis a popular saint in a mostly secular culture. In the Western world of today, environmental protection and environmentalism are more likely to inspire the masses than religious faith. Everyone seems to know St. Francis. He does seem to offer a bridge between secular intuitions about the sacred in nature and religious faith as it used to be understood.

However, Francis was a very challenging man, and many today only think that they know him. For example, everybody seems to know him by the prayer attributed to him—the one that begins with "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." However, the famous Prayer of St. Francis, the peace prayer, was not written by him. People are often surprised when they hear this. The peace prayer is an adopted child of the Franciscan family, a gifted orphan who was quickly accepted in our midst, without being conceived as an expression of Francis's spirit. It is simply a good prayer, and whoever

[1] Ioannes Paulus Pp. II, Litterae Apostolicae Inter Sanctos, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/la/apost_letters/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19791129_inter-sanctos.html, accessed February 10, 2020.

wrote it had no idea that it might later be attributed to Francis. Yes, we should strive to be peacemakers and instruments of God's mercy, and we should ask for God's help in becoming these. Francis certainly did. But this prayer is not his. His prayers were very different and demanded even more of us. For Francis, a life well lived was a life that began in God, was lived in awareness of God, and ended in God. This seems to be a whole lot more than longing for peace and harmony in creation such as all people of good will might desire, including those who do not place their faith in God and their lives in God's hands.

What is a life well lived, today? There are saints among us. Sometimes we recognize them as such when we mourn their deaths. However, it now hardly suffices to merely having lived a saintly life of prayer and devotion. We tend to expect more action, more work towards betterment of the world and the quality of life for our brothers and sisters. Our age is the age of actions and activism, and its advocates may also of invoke words attributed to Francis. He is supposed to have told the brother to preach the gospel always, and when necessary use words. But why should he have said "when necessary?" Are words the second-best choice? Can preaching only in acts ever be a substitute?

Francis never said so. Words have power—for good or evil, to bind or to lose. Francis most certainly believed in preaching by words, always. He believed that our words, when inspired by the Gospel, could become the Word of God for the hearer, the real grounding of all there is and for all our actions. He clearly understood the importance of prayerful devotion to preaching and understanding the Word of God. It is true that he did advice his brothers who lacked the skills for preaching to make their lives an example of what was preached. But he was no activist, and he probably would not even have understood what activism means. Neither his words nor his actions were ever meant to be expressions of an ideology. His preached the Word of God so that it could be understood as the basis of all that is. Actions of peace and justice would follow naturally for those who listened.

For Francis, life's purpose was to die "in God's most holy will." This is what he said we should seek, and he says so in a prayer that is most certainly his very own, the Canticle of Creatures, the prayer of Brother Sun and Sister Moon. This does not sound like modern thought today, and so it raises a rather important question: How could we still be inspired by a man such as Francis who seems so out of touch with the demands of the modern world and its many theories about progress and betterment through human ingenuity?

There is something we see in his life that reveals a hidden weakness in modern thought, a weakness which is not hard to see but one that we are afraid to acknowledge. It has something to do with our individuality, our individual existence as persons, yet not existing in sovereign self-sufficiency but as created persons with purposes that are only partly of our own making. It has something to do with the dependence of our independence. It has something to do with the world as creation and the world's dependence on the Creator. It has something to do with making sense of the world by understanding all its beings as creatures, each with a meaning bestowed by the Creator.

For us, this is a meaning that we are meant to complete. Living life well is a collaborative task between creature and Creator. Through our lives as creatures in creation, we can allow ourselves to be drawn into the mystery of the infinitely creative God. However, we need something beyond ourselves to live life in such perfection, and not just help from other human persons. We need something that is beyond natural human means. Somehow, we find it easy to see that Francis was one such man who had received this kind of help. We see it because it transformed his life in ways that we now find wonderous and inspiring beyond its own time—a life well lived.

There have been a great many others like him. In this short book, I will not attempt to offer a historical analysis of the cult of St. Francis or examine the reasons why his life is so well remembered today. These are good questions, though. I often wonder why the church in Assisi where Francis was laid to rest is so much better known than the church in Bologna where the founder of an equally successful medieval Order, St. Dominic, is buried. Without trying to understand how he differs from other saints, I accept Francis as a person whose life inspires in mysterious ways that continue to be worth exploring.

What guides my exploration of Francis's thought is the way he made sense of his life when writing his testament. It is the way it opens, the radical directness of its first paragraph, that captured my attention many years ago and still holds it today. The Lord sent Francis

among lepers. And he showed them mercy. And then everything changed, and he left the world. This is quite a story, and it really is his story. There is no doubt that the text of his testament is an authentic expression of his own thoughts in his own words. Scholars have studied the earliest manuscripts versions and concluded that Francis dictated it himself shortly before he died. He dictated other texts as well, even other testaments, but this one stands out as the most important. It was preserved by his brothers with copies found throughout the Franciscan communities in the centuries after his death. It became an important document, well known by the brothers. It is even mentioned in a papal ruling that adjudicates one of the many conflicts in the Franciscan Order that arose quickly after the death of its founder.

Francis had made sure that the brothers would recognize the importance of this text. In its closing paragraphs, he places it next to the Rule of the Order, even while carefully stressing that it is not meant to be a new Rule. He must have intended that his life, in the way he speaks of it in this testament, would become the hermeneutical key by which the life as defined in the Rule was to be lived. Of course, this truly subversive thought—making his personal life as self-attested in his testament, rather than the Church's canon law, the hermeneutical key to interpret the Rule—was precisely what the papal ruling mentioned above quite clearly rejected. Francis was not an easy man to accept as a saint, even for a pope who had been one of Francis's strongest allies.

The first five chapters of this book each begin with a section from the Testament of St. Francis. I then explore each of these sections from the perspective of life in our time, with an emphasis on the scientific-technological culture in which we live.

The first chapter and the first section of the testament is about the moment of conversion, or the recognition that there is an entirely different way to look at life. Conversion is a fundamental change in perspective, an inversion of viewpoints, and an inversion of priorities. The question of trust is the topic of the second chapter. Conversion means that old securities no longer support, but new securities are hard to find. In what do we trust? Chapter three explores the theme of community. Christian faith is always communal. Even though it is an individual decision to accept this faith, it remains an event that integrates us into a community of believers. It gives us a new place, quite possibly a much humbler one and a new challenge. Chapter four is about obedience, a rather difficult concept in an age that, for very good reasons, emphasizes personal independence and authenticity to one's individual self. How can obedience still be of value in our time and lived as a responsible expression of one's personal self?

In the fifth chapter, the book changes somewhat in tone. It is now necessary to identify more precisely what it is that is challenged by modern thought, and why it is that Francis's thought is so very useful in its context. It goes to the question of who it is and what we see when we encounter another person. Especially in an age that has strong foundations in materialist philosophy, the question of "who is a person?" cannot be put aside. It must be explored, and when it is, the answer has consequences for every aspect of our lives. It is there that we understand why Francis was rightfully made the patron saint of Christian ecologists.

The remainder of the book is about scholars in the generations immediately following Francis, from the middle of the 13th to the middle of the 14th century. This was a time when the impact of Francis's life was still fresh, and when the Franciscans lived and understood their life in a distinctly different way. They had become an Order, though, rather than just a movement. Some might think that the very fact that his vision led to the creation of an Order meant that the vision was betrayed. It did require compromises, but much can be learned from the way the original vision was defended and integrated into the life of a stable religious community. Francis's way of life is not a radically individualistic rejection of the world. Instead, it leads to a new worldview and new approaches to science, wisdom, and justice.

The man whose contribution stands out is St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. He was the first to accomplish what we now seek again: a full synthesis of scientific and scholarly ambition to make sense of the world with faithful devotion to the intuition of Francis. Chapters six is about his pursuit of science, but chapter seven turns towards his love of wisdom.

The eighth chapter then considers the very practical topic of justice. Both Blessed John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham made lasting contributions to its understanding that we value until today. Duns Scotus remained closer to the Aristotelian science and

philosophy of his time but expressed in it the principle elements of the intuitions of Francis, which was to see the Word of God, to see Christ, in all creatures and in all creation. William of Ockham's contribution is his defense of Francis's vision of poverty, and he defended it so well that it resulted in important changes in the way we see politics and its relationship to religious thought. He died excommunicated from the church and dismissed by the Franciscan Order, despite his commitment to the vision of Francis and the insights he had found there. We owe him much.

In the struggles of these Franciscan philosophers, we can find guidance on how to make sense of all forms of knowledge today and become lovers of Christ. With this insight, the book concludes.