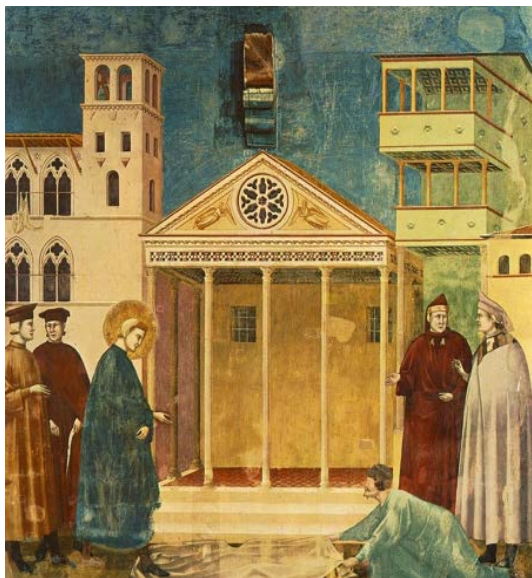


The Mortal Sin of Missing an Opportunity Embracing God as Simplicity Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

I was with a group of university students from the United States participating in a winter vacation service experience at our Franciscan mission in Jamaica. The parish, schools, and medical clinic at Above Rocks are situated in the mountains north of Kingston. It was a warm early January morning when we were asked to assist some of the local kids in moving bins filled with leftover prizes from Boxing Day. At some point along the way, one of the college students asked a couple of the kids a simple question, “What did Santa Claus bring you for Christmas”? The two children looked at him with puzzled faces. Then the more talkative of the two answered, “Everyone knows that Santa Claus doesn’t bring gifts to us dark skinned kids in the mountains. He only brings gifts to the light skinned folk in the city”.

Christmas is a time when we recall how God became little, who was born small for us. In a Christmas homily, Pope Benedict XVI preached about the implications of this saying, “In this way God teaches us to love the little ones. In this way he teaches us to love the weak. In this way he teaches us respect for children. The child of Bethlehem directs our gaze towards all children who suffer and are abused in the world, the born and the unborn. Towards children who are placed as soldiers in a violent world; towards children who have to beg; towards children who suffer deprivation and hunger; towards children who are unloved. In all of these, it is the Child of Bethlehem who is crying out to us; it is the God who has become small who appeals to us”.¹ This appeal, this attraction, calls us to reach out and embrace our God revealed to us in simplicity.

In our Franciscan tradition, we often speak of how Saint Francis’ understanding of the Incarnation is rooted in how Christ and his Mary willingly chose poverty. Their choices led Francis to his own embracing of poverty, marked by the simplicity of his calling himself a “lesser brother”. Through this title, he acknowledged his fraternal connectedness to all of God’s creatures and his desire to spend his life as a servant of Christ’s incarnational love.



In the paintings of the life cycle of Francis in Assisi, the first fresco shows him in the clothes of a wealthy young man. Directly ahead of him is someone whom Saint Bonaventure describes as a “simple man”. This simple man bows down to pay homage to Francis, recognizing in him another Christ, who would lay aside his wealth and privilege to willingly choose poverty, to become little. Notice how only the simple

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily 24 December 2006. http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20061224_christmas.html (accessed 2 November 2019).

man in the painting bears witness to all that Francis would become once the opportunity for conversion presented itself. The others look on in ignorant confusion as they fail to imagine the possibility of anyone desiring to become little.

The power of this simple man's witness is heightened by the context in which the act of homage takes place. The central, prominent feature in the fresco is the pillared portico of the ancient Roman temple of Minerva, which is located in the main square of Assisi and can still be seen today. In this space, central in the life of everyday people, the simple man's actions foreshadow the beauty of Francis' way of life that is accessible to everyone. If we, like Francis, are to become little through living a simple lifestyle, it will necessitate that we also prophetically announce the good news of a loving God who became little, to mercifully advance the common good of all.

This approach to life is at the heart of the final document of the Church's 2019 Synod on the Amazon, which held up Francis of Assisi as model of true integral conversion. By imitating his simple lifestyle, we can draw nourishment from the Franciscan spirituality rooted in the Word of God that discerns the moans of the Spirit and calls us to respond with our hearts, souls and minds to the cry of the poor and the cry of the planet.² To do this we focus on God, who abbreviated the Word to reveal its deeper simplicity and unity.³ This short Word of God is personified in Francis' conversion story which can be encapsulated in the succinct Gospel mandate to love both God and neighbor.⁴ Inspired by this simple Word of God and following in the footsteps of Francis, we are now challenged to ask: Who is my neighbor?

The answer is found in one's becoming oriented toward living the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ, in a manner that is both personal and communal. This incarnating of the Gospel in our own decision-making means acknowledging the interconnectedness of the web of life that compels us to move towards the existential, social and geographical peripheries.⁵ As Francis did in his life, here we too can discover the core of a simple lifestyle being marked by a radical openness and availability to God and neighbor, including our sister, Mother Earth. Like Francis we are to seize the opportunities God puts before us: to open our hearts in private prayer with God, to be a true friend to the poor, and to sing joyfully God's praises with all of creation in word and deed.

Too often the Franciscan way of life is misunderstood as the simple giving up of material goods. This is not true and such a path often leads to people cultivating a false sense of humility that is self-referential and destructive. Our Franciscan way of a simple lifestyle is marked by our not letting our possessions possess us, which then assists us in putting God and other people first in our lives. Of course, this is a healthy potential lifestyle for everyone. For this reason, Pope Benedict, insists that we all are called, "to give each other something of ourselves, to give each

² Sinodo Amazonico – Documento Finale, 26 ottobre 2019, # 17.

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2019/10/26/0820/01706.html#CAP5> (accessed November 2, 2019).

³ Ibid, Pope Benedict XVI.

⁴ Matthew 22:27-40.

⁵ Ibid, Sinodo Amazonico #18-19.

other something of our time, to open our time to God.”⁶ If we can manage this, then our detachment from things, biases, and inclinations will bear witness to our personal and communal simplicity rooted on continual conversion.

It is the gift of time shared in right relationship that is the hallmark of Franciscan hearted people choosing poverty. By the offering of ourselves through the gift of time, we cultivate a Franciscan attitude that easily recognizes everything as a gift from God. Marked by this spirit of personal availability, the university students intentionally chose to live a simple lifestyle during their winter vacation time. They willingly chose to move toward the existential, social, and geographic periphery in our world today, through a service trip to Jamaica that would ultimately present them with further opportunities of conversion.

On that warm early January morning an opportunity of integral conversion presented itself while moving bins full of leftover Boxing Day prizes. This led to an evening of reflection time with the university students, where the story about Santa Claus in Jamaica became the topic of our shared conversation. One of the local friars went on to explain for us how Boxing Day originated in Great Britain and occurs every December 26th. As a holiday, it had served as an opportunity for the wealthy to express their appreciation to their servants by offering them a gift box of appreciation. Boxing Day in Above Rocks, Jamaica had morphed into an opportunity for the Franciscans to host a *Christmas Fair* of games and fun for children, where every child departs with a Christmas gift.⁷ In a way, Santa Claus comes a day late in the mountains.

There is an island saying I learned over my years of visiting Jamaica, “*The mortal sin of a Jamaican is missing an opportunity*”. Boxing Day is but one small way Franciscan lesser brothers and sisters on the island embraced the opportunity to correct the injustice of the unequal distribution of wealth while bringing Christmas joy to children. Remarkably, this takes place on a day when most religious and clergy find themselves exhausted and with no time for anything beyond rest. In the same way, the university students gave up their vacation time to espouse an attitude of simplicity of life. As a result of their availability and openness, they learned from our Jamaican hosts how to better respond to the attraction of the little Christ Child by reaching out and embracing our God who is revealed to us as simplicity and directs the gaze of us all toward the disadvantaged children of today.



⁶ Ibid, Pope Benedict XVI.

⁷ St. Mary's, Above Rocks and Missions. <http://stmaryaboverocks.blogspot.com/2009/12/boxing-day-2009.html> (accessed November 2, 2019).