

## Indifference: The Great Sin Where the Poor Are Concerned Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

It is called “la corrente”, the draft! Most Italians have a visceral fear of drafts, which they believe cause sickness. So, they will go to great lengths to keep the air in a room as warm and stagnate as possible. Once I walked into the office of an Italian friar and was surprised to find the window open on a warm and sunny day. Immediately he called out, “Close the door, la corrente”! Then I realized that the window, on the far side of the room, was next to the desk of a friar from northern Europe. They must have brokered a compromise of “window open & door closed”.

Now that I live in Italy, I find myself wondering from time to time, about the reaction of the Italian cardinals and bishops in 1959 when Pope Saint John XXIII, a Third Order Franciscan, announced his plans for convening the Second Vatican Council. The Pope’s hope was that the church might experience an *aggiornamento*, an updating. The image he offered, to better capture the spirit of *aggiornamento*, is the opening of a window to let the Holy Spirit blow through and make things fresh. I imagine many who worked in the Roman Curia hurried back to their stuffy offices, after that announcement, and began strategizing how to stifle the plans of the Pope. For they sensed a draft of bishops arriving on their Roman doorstep with new ideas, of how people might better live the Gospel in the modern world. Such talk threatened their comfort and certitude of what they believed to be fixed expressions of faith.



On the feast day of Saint Francis in 1962, one week before the opening of the Council, Pope John made pilgrimage to Loretto and Assisi, entrusting the Council to the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Francis. This pilgrimage modeled *aggiornamento*, as it was the first time in living memory that a Pope left Rome.<sup>1</sup> The Council began, as a Franciscan Pope opened the windows of the Vatican and the Holy Spirit arrived like a rushing wind that inspired many to speak up in different tongues, like those gathered in the upper room at Pentecost. Some of the Fathers of the Council, however, pulled their stoles tight around their necks, like woolen scarves, as they murmured in protest, “la corrente, close the door”!

Saint Francis called the wind his brother.<sup>2</sup> He also called the Holy Spirit the Minister General of the Order.<sup>3</sup> It was the wind of the Spirit that carried Francis to Rome in 1209, seeking approval for his new way of living the Gospel in the Church. That same Spirit inspired Francis to return to Rome in 1223 and seek formal approval for his Rule of Life. Francis’ Rule was an *aggiornamento*

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<sup>1</sup> In Your Midst, *The Council Begins*, April 2009, <https://www.stjames-cathedral.org/pubs/midst/09April/councilbegins.htm> (Accessed 6 November 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Creatures*. FA:ED, vol. 1, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas of Celano. *Second Life of Saint Francis*, 145.

of religious life in the Middle Ages, which like the Second Vatican Council, was met with mixed reviews. Francis reflected long and hard, to correctly discern the promptings of the Spirit. Prudently and with humility, he listened beyond the Umbrian wind rustling through the trees, to discover how Brother Wind caressed the wood of the cross and carried the sweet smell of mercy and compassion to the poor, lost, sick, and weak. Francis and the friars desired to do the same in the world, not from a monastery.

One of the frescos of the life cycle of Saint Francis in Assisi, shows this encounter of Francis and Pope Honorius III with his College of Cardinals. As Francis speaks of his Rule and Holy Poverty,

Brother Leo sits comfortably while resting his head in the palm of his hand. Leo is listening attentively, as are two other prelates who have assumed the same meditative posture, savoring every word that comes from the mouth of the poor man from Assisi. Pope Honorius seems profoundly moved by what he is hearing as he leans in toward Francis' words. At the same time he looks out toward the poor as he pulls his pallium, the papal stole that looks like a loose fitting scarf, onto his lap, for "the lamb's wool is meant to represent the lost, sick or weak sheep which the shepherd places on his shoulders and carries to the waters of life."<sup>4</sup> As a pope in the High Middle Ages, Honorius' temporal crown weighed upon him more than the lamb's wool scarf marked with the sign of the cross. Francis' words must have gathered around the pope like a rushing wind, carrying him to the waters of life.



Refreshed by all he heard, Pope Honorius approved Francis' Rule as an *aggiornamento*, the opening of a window that would bring the consolation of the Spirit to a Church of the poor and for the poor.

Two figures in the third arch, dressed in red and blue are not in agreement with the vision and mission of the lesser brothers from Assisi. The one in red reveals a few fingers from under his robe but not to indicate his willingness to join the discussion. Instead, he pulls his cloak tight about himself, guarding against "la corrente" of Francis' words. His disdain betrays his own pride and greed, as he guards his life against the sickening threat of Francis' reform. Some bishops resisted the initial Franciscan wind that swept across Europe. In time the buffeting of the Spirit of God, manifest in the preaching and life of the friars, would break down many closed doors of

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. Homily 24 April 2005, [https://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/details/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_20091117\\_pallio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/details/ns_lit_doc_20091117_pallio_en.html). (Accessed 6 November 2022).

stubbornness. On a positive note, at least the prelate in red is reacting to Francis. Any reaction, including a negative one, leaves some room for creativity and possible conversion.



The figure in blue, however, sits stoically indifferent to the wind of change swirling around the room. His stare is blank, his posture is erect, and his hands are tucked firmly into his robes. He wants nothing to do with Francis and his *aggiornamento* because he personifies evil, which is unmasked by his foot peeking out from beneath the hem of his garment in the form of a cloven hoof! This appearance of a demon indicates this fresco being coupled with another on the opposite side of the church, which depicts Brother Sylvester and Francis casting the demons out of Arezzo.<sup>5</sup>

In these frescos we see represented the effects of extremism when it grows into an indifference. Reflecting on such horrors found behind the black gates of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel reminds us, “Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor – never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees – not to respond to their plight not to respond to their solitude by offering a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own. Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment.”<sup>6</sup>

On the first World Day of the Poor in 2017, Pope Francis spoke of the great sin of indifference. “In the poor, Jesus knocks on the doors of our hearts, thirsting for our love. When we overcome our indifference, and in the name of Jesus we give of ourselves for the least of his sisters and brothers, we are his good and faithful friends, with whom he loves to dwell.”<sup>7</sup> Establishing this yearly observance, following the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis challenges the entire Church to an *aggiornamento* of love, not with words but with deeds. This exhortation recalls a quote often attributed to Saint Francis, “Preach the Gospel and when necessary, use words.”<sup>8</sup> What Francis actually said, in his Rule, was that the friars should preach through their deeds.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv. *Haggling for the Common Good*.

<sup>6</sup> Elie Wiesel. *The Perils of Indifference*, delivered 12 April 1999, The White House, Washington D.C. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ewieselperilsofindifference.html>. (Accessed 6 November 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Gerard O’Connell. *Pope Francis: Indifference to the Poor is a Great Sin*. *America Magazine*, 19 November 2017. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/11/19/pope-francis-indifference-poor-great-sin>. (Accessed 6 November 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Stanton. *Fact Checker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi*. *Bible & Theology*, 10 July 2012. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>. (Accessed 6 November 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Francis of Assisi. *The Earlier Rule*. FA:ED, vol.1, p.75.

Like Saint Francis and Pope John before him, Pope Francis has met resistance from within the Church. A simple example proved itself to be worthy of the painting of a contemporary fresco,



when in August of 2022 Pope Francis created 20 new Cardinals in Saint Peter's Basilica. During the ceremony, Arthur Cardinal Roche offered a few word of reflection on the role of the Cardinals saying to the pope, "Our mission today is to help you carry this cross and not to increase its weight...From you, Holy Father, we learn to resist the temptation of any narrowness of mind and heart which shrinks to the size of self instead of expanding 'to the measure of the fullness of

Christ'."<sup>10</sup> A bishop sitting in the row immediately behind the Cardinals later remarked that as Cardinal Roche spoke, there were audible groans from some within the College.

The aggiornamento of Saint Francis with his Rule and of Pope Saint John XXIII with Vatican II, was the opening of the same window that Pope Francis has propped open for us today. It is the window to our hearts, where the Holy Spirit desires to stir us from our indifference, toward loving deeds of mercy and compassion. It is now for us to choose our particular response. Ideally, we would accustom ourselves to a life driven by the promptings of Brother Wind and put on a loose scarf of lamb's wool to remind us of our responsibility to the poor. Some, however, will inevitably choose to pull their scarves tight about them and cry out, "Close the door, la corrente"! Either way, the window is still open.

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Lamb. *Stubborn opposition to Vatican II 'not Catholic' says cardinal*, The Tablet, 28 August 2022. <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15805/stubborn-opposition-to-vatican-ii-not-catholic-says-cardinal>. (Accessed on 6 November 2022).