

St. Francis Preaching before Honorius III

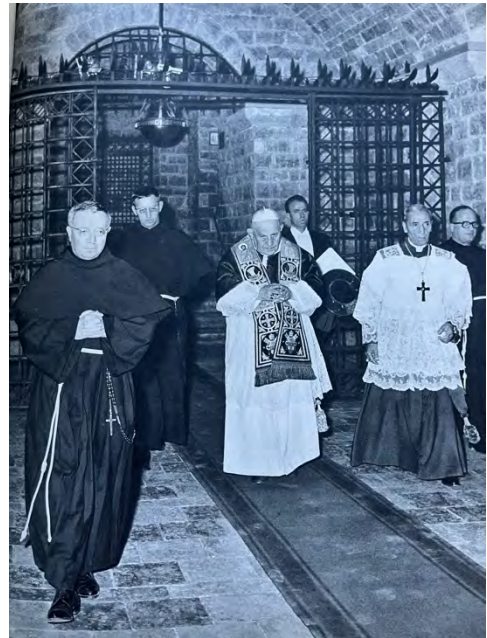
INDIFFERENCE: THE GREAT SIN WHERE THE POOR ARE CONCERNED
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The Prophet Micah reminds us, “The Lord has shown you what is good. So, what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love *mercy*, and to walk humbly with your God.”
(Micah 6:8)

It is called “la corrente”, the draft! Italians have a visceral fear of drafts. They go to great lengths to keep the air in a room as still as possible. Recently walking into the office of an Italian friar, I was surprised to find the window open. Immediately he called out, “Close the door, la corrente”! Then I realized that the window was next to the desk of a friar from northern Europe. They must have brokered a compromise of “window open-door closed”.

This aversion to la corrente can serve as an image for the reaction of some people to Pope John XXIII’s announcement of the Second Vatican Council. The Pope’s hope was that the church might experience an *aggiornamento*, an updating. The image he offered was the opening of a window to let the Holy Spirit blow through the Church and make things fresh. Many of the Roman Curia bunkered down in their stuffy offices and strategized how to stifle the plans of the Pope. For they sensed *a draft of bishops* arriving on their Roman doorstep with new ideas, which threatened their comfort and the certitude of what they believed to be fixed expressions of faith. Some likely pulled their stoles tight around their necks, like woolen scarves, as they murmured in protest, “la corrente, close the window”!

It was the wind of the Spirit that carried St. Francis to Rome in 1223 to seek formal approval for his Rule of Life. Francis was offering an *aggiornamento* of religious life in the Middle Ages. Like the Second Vatican Council, Francis’ ideas on Gospel living were met with mixed reviews because Francis and the friars were living as a Church for, with, and of the poor. 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.



Let’s consider for a moment the actions within the fresco. Francis is speaking, while Brother Leo listens to Francis and rests his head in the palm of his hand. Two other prelates and Pope Honorius have assumed the same meditative posture, savoring every word. As Francis offers his thoughts about Gospel poverty, the Pope pulls at his pallium. The pallium looks like a loose-fitting scarf, and being made of lambs’ wool represents the poor and weak sheep. 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. Refreshed by all he heard, 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 other prelates, in the scene, have their hands in motion as if questioning Francis. They are engaging in the conversation. While the final two figures in the third arch (dressed in red and blue) are not in agreement with the vision and mission of the poor friars from Assisi. The one in red reveals only 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 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! His appearing as a masked demon indicates this fresco being coupled with another on the opposite side of the basilica, which depicts demons being cast out of Arezzo.

In these frescos we see represented the effects of extremism when it grows into the evil of indifference. Reflecting on the horrors of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel reminds us, how indifference elicits no response. For the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference as it fails to offer even a spark of hope to the suffering. Thus, indifference is not only the opposite of the Gospel, but through its betrayal of humanity indifference becomes a prison for the ones who in turn have forsaken their own humanity.

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."

The *aggiornamento* of Francis with his Rule and of Pope 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 the wind of the Spirit 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 window, *la corrente*!" Either way, the Spirit is rushing through.

