



*Homage of a Simple Man*

**THE MORTAL SIN OF MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY  
EMBRACING GOD AS SIMPLICITY  
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**In Luke's Gospel Mary prays, "God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His *mercy*."  
(Luke 1:53-54)**

It was a warm January morning in the mountains north of Kingston, Jamaica. We were doing the final clean-up of the leftover prizes from Boxing Day when I overheard some university students from the United States, assisting at our Franciscan mission, ask a couple local children 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 his 2006 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.”



This appeal, this attraction, calls us to reach out and embrace our God revealed to us in simplicity. 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 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.

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 other something of our time, to open our time to God.” 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 January morning, an opportunity of conversion presented itself in a conversation over leftover Boxing Day prizes. This led to an evening of reflection time with the university students, where the question and answer about Santa Claus and Christmas gifts 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 26<sup>th</sup>. 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 Jamaica had morphed into an opportunity for the Franciscans to host a *Christmas Fair* for children, where every child departs with a Christmas gift. In a way, Santa Claus comes a day late in the mountains.

There is a popular island belief that *“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. In a similar 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, we all learned from our Jamaican hosts how to better respond to the attraction of the little Christ Child. Through Him, we reached out and embraced our God who is revealed to us as simplicity and directs the gaze of us all toward the disadvantaged children of today.

