

God So Loved the World

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Francis used to recall with regular meditation the words of Christ and recollect his deeds with most attentive perception. Indeed, so thoroughly did the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion occupy his memory that he scarcely wanted to think of anything else. [The Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano, Ch. 30]

This is how Thomas introduced his readers to the story of Francis at Greccio, how he contributed to the tradition of the Nativity Scene as part of Christmas. The two parts of the Christ Event, the Birth and Passion, shaped Francis' life. He was overwhelmed many times when considering the fact that God made a dwelling among us as one of us simple human beings. Francis was often moved to tears when he meditated on Christ, the Incarnate Word who humbly accepted the humiliation of public shame and execution. Rather than retell the story of Greccio this year, perhaps it's time to dwell on the implications of the Incarnation in our daily lives. How can the humility of Jesus possibly affect our outlook on the world around us and strengthen our attempts to live a Gospel life?



Humility is not exactly a highly cherished virtue in our culture these days. The daily rat race to succeed, a desire to conquer anyone in one's way at work, the willingness to pay someone to get a child into college, to surreptitiously hide the crimes of a known perpetrator for years, daring to flash a hand signal to another driver who cuts me off on the road – these are all examples of how we don't realize how much ME is in our daily rhythm. How did the culture of this country

become so wrapped up in selfishness? When did we get to the point where we lost a sense of the common good? Other cultures continue to live with a whole sense of 'the other', meaning that people are not just aware of others but actually care for and protect them. For instance, if you travel or live in another country it doesn't take long to get a sense of how a people cherish their families. Many Asian countries honor their elders with great esteem and respect. Latin and South American families reflect a sense of being with and for one another. Middle Eastern peoples have a very solid sense of solidarity within their families. In fact, that was what was so striking about the ministry of Jesus; he was never afraid to get dirty with outcasts or cross boundaries to accomplish his mission. He was constantly with and for other people.

I have loved the photograph above for years. I don't know the artist who took it but I'm grateful for the image captured. The tiny hand, the much larger finger. What a lovely way to express new life that's entered the world. Whenever I'm near a newborn child I always look at fingers and fingernails. I suppose this fascination is a byproduct of my own awareness of what my fingers are still able to do so nimbly. A baby's hand grasps firmly and that's how I imagine the relationship between God, the Creator, and the Divine Son. Everlasting. Bonded with strength and complete love.

That is also how I imagine each of us can be united with our God. The touch of a tiny child and a parent is unlike any other bond. We have a new baby in our family this year and to watch her slowly grow and feel her grip strengthen is fascinating. But just as that grip can loosen so can our union with God. Francis was captivated by that union so eloquently expressed in the Gospel of John: *"In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him."* [John 14:19-21] That intimacy is our choice – to hold on or let go.

In his *Evening Sermon on St. Francis* of 1255 St. Bonaventure spoke eloquently about the results of humility. “Perfect humility is the greatest virtue because it makes us perfect in God’s sight and because by it God is revered and honored to the utmost.” Bonaventure even promises that the more humble one is on earth, the more sublime will be one’s place in glory. Quite a promise, isn’t it? The more one cultivates lowliness, the less arrogant one is. That’s a lesson for today’s world, isn’t it?



Our brilliant theologian lists four ways to acquire humility. The **first path** to humility is meditation on God. When we attribute everything that is good to God and nothing to ourselves, we are humble. The **second path** is to remember Christ, to honestly see all that Christ did for us. In his birth into the human estate and his humble acceptance of death, Jesus sets an example of how one can empty oneself of selfishness. The **third path** is that we make an honest assessment of ourselves, that we see where we came from and where we would like to go. In remembering the changes within ourselves, we have an opportunity to see how God transforms us when we cooperate with grace. And the **fourth path** to humility is respect for others. Would that we all would take this to heart! When I consider the person in front of me without preconceived notions or categories I think much less of myself and can see her or him as a creature of God worthy of dignity and respect.

Now, if you look at all four of these paths to humility you see how they are down to earth and quite practical. Challenging to practice, yes, but each one can be a wellspring for spiritual growth. The **first path** is meditation on God. Lots of people think that meditation belongs only to those who practice yoga or can sit silently for hours on end. Not

so. I encourage commuters to spend time during their train or bus ride to work to consider the gift of another day of life, another chance to live with God’s people, another bit of time to bring God’s compassion to someone in need. We don’t have to be quiet for an hour to keep God uppermost in our minds. A little shot of prayer on the bus can brighten our hearts as we walk into the office rat race, mindful that God is with us in the mayhem. The **second path**, to remember all that Jesus did for us, is quite easy. Every single time we celebrate the Eucharist we bring to mind the great events of salvation history. Decades of the Rosary help us recall events in the Lord’s life. Christmas has everything to do with telling the Story once again and dwelling on the fact that God loved us so much at a point in history that we were given the only Son who deigned to become one with us. And who are we to have been given such a gift as Christ?

On the **third path** Bonaventure calls us to take an inventory of our lives. Retrospect can be important in our spiritual growth. When I recall how God has saved me from myself in making a big decision I remember how God’s grace guided me from one place in life to another. It’s important to see and remember the great moments when we surrender to God’s will and realize we’re not alone on this journey called life.

The **fourth path** asks that we respect others. It’s no secret that our city streets have many people who beg for help. Some are in your face while others hide their faces in shame. People often ask how it’s possible to help every one of these less fortunate people and here’s a solution I’ve found helpful. It’s just not possible to give money to every person who asks; however, what we can give every person is eye contact and at least a greeting.

One young man I’ve come to know over the years, Drew, is African-American and not more than 30. When I’m hurrying to our parking garage I only have time to say ‘good morning.’ Other times I spend time talking and my eyes take in things like crusty eye lashes, gritty teeth, dirty nails, an iPad, cardboard sign and a blanket that looks like he swept the alley



with it. I don't list these to belittle him, they're just some of what Drew is. And I wonder as we talk 'How do you recharge that iPad?' or 'Where do you go to the bathroom?' or 'Aren't you frozen today?' I know for a fact that occasionally he's cleaned himself up and gotten jobs and even housing, but every now and then he's back on the streets. I seldom give him money but sometimes offer food. Drew always smiles when he sees me coming because he knows I will talk with him, he knows I acknowledge his existence as a human. He always thanks me for spending time with him.

The next time you're visiting someone in the hospital, be attentive to how often you talk and how much the patient talks. I learned years ago in hospital ministry training to be quiet and allow the patient to speak without telling him or her what to say. This is a concrete way of making yourself a little less in the conversation so the patient is the focus. It's good pastoral practice in any situation so that the other person is afforded time, attention and compassion. That's being respectful.

Bonaventure ends his lengthy sermon on humility with a reminder to the friars of how Francis lived humility by serving lepers, the lowest outcasts in his medieval world. In fact, it's now known that if a man wanted to join the friars he had to assist the other friars in the leprosarium. Francis insisted that inquirers not listen to lectures or study all day but get into the trenches of poverty and bring Christ to the little

ones in humility.

Francis of Assisi continues to teach us about the virtue of humility not just by his own example, but by the legacy he's left the Franciscan world to serve the poor, the lost and the forsaken on earth. We serve in myriad ways throughout the nations of Mother Earth and thank you for your generous support that allows us to touch lives here at St. Peter's and elsewhere. Christmas is a multi-faceted feast and for us Franciscans, the most important part is to remember the event of the Incarnation. Again, Francis was overwhelmed by the fact that God dared to become one with us. Who are we to be considered worthy of such an expression of unmitigated love? Who are any of us to be so loved by our Creator, despite the selfishness we so often allow to guide our lives? Yet we are the children of the Kingdom, a Kingdom brought into being in Bethlehem, made visible each day by our own humble expressions of God's mercy and kindness to others.

We invite you to join us at St. Peter's for the celebrations of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Consult our weekly bulletin for the times and special events of Masses, Penance service, Vespers and more throughout the season including this one:

**FRIARS AND FRIENDS IN A
CHRISTMAS CONCERT
Thursday, December 5, 12 Noon
St. Clare Auditorium**

Eight friars and Ms. Emily Bednar will perform a variety of music of the Season with lots of instruments. Admission is only \$10 for concert and a reception that follows. Join us for holiday fun in a Franciscan atmosphere.

We continuously pray for all our benefactors at every Eucharist and at our common prayer each day. May God fill you and our earth with peace. From all the friars of Saint Peter's community – **Merry Christmas!**

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