

STRIP AWAY VIOLENCE



FRIAR BOB HUTMACHER, OFM

Many people are familiar with the story of how St. Francis renounced his earthly belongings and familial ties in front of his parents and the Bishop of Assisi. It was certainly a pivotal point in his tumultuous years of conversion to a Gospel-centered life. However, a new book, **Francis' Nudity** by Italian scholar Marco Bartoli and translated by our own Gilberto Cavazos-González, ofm, places that event within the context of Francis' entire life and the many times he stripped off his clothes in public. Don't be shocked. People in the Middle Ages placed great significance on symbolic actions and rituals because they showed a person's experience of God and the fact that she or he was making a radical shift in life, knowing God was present in her or his heart. Here's a story from Thomas of Celano's recently discovered *Vita beati patris nostri Francisci (The Life of our Blessed Father, Francis)* now referred to as *C1.5*.

An admirable thing: when he came to Rome, merchant among merchants (he was still in the world), Francis saw that at St. Peter's Basilica there were, as usual, many beggars and poor people. Feeling compassion for them and wanting to experience their miseries, to see if he could endure them even for just a bit of time, unbeknownst to his companions, he laid down his robes and wore the tattered and smelly clothes of the wretched and, putting himself among them, he sat down

and, begging, he ate cheerfully with them. He claimed in fact that he had never before eaten anything more delicious. (C1.5 65)

In the context of Francis' entire life, according to Bartoli, this event reveals two things. This took place in Rome before he renounced his family ties and possessions in 1206. First, it shows how Francis completely changed his disdain for the poor and "shared in their condition and the contempt they received." It is, even more importantly, revelatory of what was going on inside him. We have to remember that Francis did not turn from his comfortable life of a merchant to itinerant preacher overnight. He wrestled with God, his own self-concept and clashing value systems over a period of perhaps four to five years. Yes, years! So this dramatic action wasn't just some young Italian man's crazy way to attract attention. He was truly exploring what life would be like to live with nothing. Just as Christ "emptied himself" Francis slowly discovered what such a move would demand of him.

There are other stories of Francis taking his clothes off to preach in public, ending with the intense, striking event a few days before his death in 1226 in which he asked to be stripped naked and placed on the ground so as to leave earth just as he had entered it. But the one pictured by Giotto on this page (from the upper Basilica of Francis in Assisi) portrays his father, Pietro Bernadone, holding his clothing and the bishop of Assisi covering Francis with his cope as the townspeople observe this shocking gesture. However, what the artwork does not fully portray is fear. Pietro was known to have had a fierce temper that exploded more than once during Francis' years of conversion. He beat Francis, shamed him in public and actually, by law, could have disowned him had Francis not initiated this break himself.

The significance here: Francis not only undressed and said "I have no father but our Father in heaven," but he made himself completely defenseless before a man of power, strength and brute force. Francis surrendered in the face of violence. And in humbly doing that, Francis simultaneously rendered the violence of Pietro Bernadone completely useless. There was

nothing for him to take or anyone strike or roar at because Francis had only God. Only God.

After this dramatic renunciation, Francis put on the garments of a beggar, walked through the city gates and headed off to the village of Gubbio about 50 kilometers north of Assisi. Along the way a gang of robbers confronted him in the woods when they heard him praising God in French. Thinking he was a rich and educated man, they asked for identification. Francis proclaimed: "I'm the herald of the Great King." They beat him and threw him in a ditch because he had nothing to take. Francis was exuberant with joy because finally he was genuinely poor. And once again, his humility curtailed violence.

And now you know why I begin this month's article with these particular stories. January 6, 2021 was a surprise attack on our national sensibilities, our dignity, our democracy. Politics aside, the video clips from January 6 that have flooded our senses take our shared experiences of "united states" and violently rattle national pride. The scenes of physical brutality and lack of respect for this country revealed the long-hidden hatred that lives right under the surface of the 'land of the free.'

Violent acts like carjacking in Chicago have risen alarmingly since Christmas. We are overwhelmed with weekend news reports like: "42 people were shot since Friday night, 6 of whom died." The events of summer 2020 revealed, in depth, who wins and who loses in our country. If you are a young, black male, you have two strikes against you before you even leave your house. Surf through Netflix, tv and other media and you find an overabundance of violence, particularly acts against women. Have we become so accustomed to seeing acts of brutality that sometimes, we're numb to it? It's 'out there', 'one of them' or 'too bad.' However, all this violence is our world. It is part of us.

A Franciscan scholar I lived with in Assisi during the 1990's, Marino Bigaroni, published *The Assisi Compilation*, a treasure through which we can see the beginnings of our Order. Here's is one of the stories from this 1311 manuscript.

Once Francis was preaching in the piazza of Perugia to a large crowd. Some knights of Perugia began racing their horses

around the piazza, jousting and disturbing the preaching. People listening to the preaching reprimanded them but they did not stop. Blessed Francis turned to them and with a fiery spirit, said: "Listen and understand what the Lord is telling you through me, His servant, and don't say, 'This one is from Assisi!' He said this because of the long-standing enmity between Perugia and Assisi.

"The Lord has exalted and elevated you above all your neighbors. Because of this, you must acknowledge your Creator all the more, and humble yourselves not only before almighty God but also before your neighbors. But your hearts are arrogant and full of pride. You attack and kill your neighbors. I tell you, unless you quickly turn to God and compensate those whom you have injured, the Lord will cause you to rise up against each other. You'll be torn apart by sedition and civil war, suffering a far greater calamity than your neighbors could ever inflict on you."

A few days later a scandal broke out between the knights and the people. They destroyed each other's vineyards, fields and trees. In this way everything that blessed Francis predicted about them was fulfilled to the letter.

Did you notice the word sedition in there? Antagonistic behaviors? Retribution? Anger and hatred? Do you see any similarities between the 13th and 21st centuries? Between *The Assisi Compilation* and January 6, 2021 in Washington? Francis lived in the cruel violence of medieval Europe. He was part of an insurrection to destroy Assisi's imperial castle in 1198, a civil war and even the equivalent of gang warfare within Assisi. He was a POW for a year in the city where the story above took place. He witnessed first-hand the bloody violence of the Crusades within both Christian and Muslim camps in the Holy Land and Egypt. Francis knew violence.

The Little Man of Peace learned early on in his conversion that stripping himself of power and violence made him stronger than the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor and the popes that traversed the valleys of Umbria. How can that be? Francis modeled his life on the Crucified Christ who completely emptied himself of divine

and human power in the Incarnation and his own Paschal Mystery. When Francis became a beggar for a few hours in Rome, when he relinquished his family, when he preached naked with Brother Rufino – all these gestures were not to draw attention to himself. His actions symbolized his interior desire to imitate the self-emptying of the poor crucified Jesus.

We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We are merely bringing to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.

Dr. Martin Luther King, jr.

Remember the story of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery? The self-righteous leaders and townsfolk dwindled away because of the power of the Lord's words: "Let any one of you who is without sin cast the first stone." No fists, swords or anger. I wonder what the scene in Washington, D.C. on January 6 would have been like had words of peace been spoken, rather than words to incite violence. We know the answer.

Our country yearns for healing. Many in the Catholic Church beg to be reconciled or seek justice for sexual abuse or years of oppressive, patriarchal attitudes and exclusion. Children cry to be released from cages, people of color continue to strive bravely for the dignity that is inherent in all God's children. Mother Earth longs for preventative actions to preserve her (our) natural resources so long defiled. Where can we possibly begin?

In our hearts. The power Jesus, Francis and millions of their followers have found is, again, the presence and goodness of God. When one surrenders to the will of the Holy One, she or he discovers that there is no need to claim power or put on a false semblance of superiority. It is in our nothingness that God is revealed. That's why Francis didn't strike back at the robbers near Gubbio. Giants like Dr. King, Alice Paul, Ghandi, the Berrigan brothers, Nelson Mandela and Lech Walesa proclaimed non-violence as a way of life. Non-violent actions produce change and the purpose of such actions is to defeat evil and injustice, not people.

Pietro Bernadone lost power over his son the moment Francis allowed God to fill his heart with goodness. Who can argue with God? The non-violent approach to changing the status quo gets its strength from humility. Why would a Roman centurion see the goodness of God revealed in the words and crucified body of Jesus? St. Paul wrote that when we become less, Christ becomes more in us. The message is clear!

I'm writing this on January 20, a day filled with much newness! Pray that we can end the plague of Covid 19 and assure good health for the whole world. Pray that hate groups come to see the futility of violence and allow God's grace to melt away evil. Pray that all people on Earth come to know the freedom and dignity inherent in every human loved into existence by God. Pray that we all learn new ways to protect and replenish our natural resources. Pray that each of us can strip away selfish ways of accumulating power so we can contribute to a just distribution of goods and services for the common good. Pray that the example of Francis of Assisi permeates our political leaders so they all work together for the benefit of all people.

Meet my great niece, Maddie, and her friend in day care. Sweet little girls show us big



people how to love freely, enjoy life, how to embrace and *smoosh your bestest frind real good*. Learn from them. Amanda Gorman wrote a magnificent poem for President Biden's inauguration,

saying in part:

**The new dawn blooms as we free it,
For there is always light,
if only we are brave enough to see it –
if only we are brave enough to be it.**

May God fill your life with Light and give you the courage to live humbly so the days ahead will bring healing to our world. Peace and all good ~

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