

Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life

By Lawrence S. Cunningham

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Lawrence Cunningham, who teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame, begins his new biography of Francis of Assisi with a fairly iconoclastic preface. He wants to re-situate Francis in his medieval, Catholic context: “to understand him against everything that was going on in his age—the rise of urban life, the birth of the universities, the crusades, the reforming councils, the culture of mercantilism.” (pg. 127) To do that, he first challenges head on what he calls the “romantic view” of Francis represented by the statue in the garden, the 1970s “hippy” in Zefereilli’s “saccharine film” *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (his quotes) and most especially the “tradition that has crystallized in those piously charming ‘blessings of the animals’ so beloved of certain Episcopal rectors in this country.” (pg. viii)

The metaphor Cunningham chooses to reveal this re-contextualized Francis is as one who sought to articulate and live the ideal gospel life, or *vita evangelica*. To live this gospel means resisting all attempts to spiritualize it—to see it not as “a book for meditation but marching orders for living.” (pg. 135) To communicate this gospel, then is first and foremost about “the way one lives, the fashion in which a person interacts with others, the picture one presents to the world.” (pg. 135) Francis put his theory of communication into practice when he gave this advice to some of his brothers as they were about to enter a town: “preach, and if necessary, use words.” (pg. 135)

Cunningham convincingly argues then that we should see Francis not as a solitary figure railing against the institutional church, but rather as one profoundly shaped by the challenge of learning how to be a Christian within a community shaped by the gospel. The sacraments, serious catechesis, and the necessary boundaries and structures that community requires are not meant to be escaped. Rather, they find their true purpose when one begins to live what is expected of those who follow Jesus.

Cunningham makes much of Francis stripping off his clothes in the public square, in front of the bishop, to give them back to his father. He notes the classical formulation—that goes back at least to St. Jerome—of the spiritual dictum which spoke of “nakedly following the naked Christ.” (*nudus nudum Christum sequi*). “The Fathers,” he writes, “loved to play with the concept of the naked Christ: born without clothing in his nativity and stripped by the Roman soldiers before his crucifixion. To crucify a person naked was to bring that person to further shame by exposing the person to the gaze of the crowd.” (pg. 20) So, too, Francis saw in the Incarnation “a humility in the Son of God that allowed him to be an infant, to put himself under the obedience of the Holy Family, and finally to die on the cross, naked and alone.” Profoundly moved by the story of Christ’s simple birth as a homeless person—Francis re-enacted the event in the small town of Greccio as a first example of what we might call a “live nativity.” For Francis, the manger and the cross framed this extraordinary life of Jesus that his followers were (and are) called to “perform” in living the gospel life.

His radical embrace of Lady Poverty as the surest way to imitate Christ becomes the way that he finds Christ in the world. It also enables him to embrace the lepers of his day for a rather simple reason: *since* Christ served abandoned lepers in his ministry, *then* his followers should also do likewise.

Noting that the motivation of the crusades was not only about trying to restore the holy lands to the Christian world, but also an attempt to try to keep the Muslim world at bay, Cunningham unpacks the “anti-Muslim spirit that became deeply woven into the culture of Europe.” (pg. 46) It was within this context that Francis went on his quixotic mission to the Islamic world to preach the gospel and its message of peace—fully aware that he would likely die as a martyr in so doing.

He went, nevertheless, crossing the battle lines to speak to the caliph, Malik-al-Kamil. While it is difficult to sort through the legends around this visit and what actually happened, it seems clear that he and Malik-al-Kamil did spend time together. Some have suggested that the caliph was a Sufi mystic who respected this Western holy man a great deal. What is indisputable is that Francis dared to cross enemy lines and meet face to face with someone demonized by the crusaders—offering a rare example of a Christian and a Muslim actually confronting one another in medieval times without arms. Cunningham notes that in so doing “Francis gave an alternative understanding of the word ‘crusader’ (Latin: *Crucifer*; Greek: *Christopheros*)—one who bears the cross.” (pg. 63)

I still plan to include a service for “blessing of the animals” in our parish celebrations on the Feast of St. Francis this fall; I am, after all, one of *those* “Episcopal rectors!” And we will continue to keep our lovely statue of Francis, with the birds on his shoulder, in our garden. I feel both enriched and challenged, however, by this book—and more fully aware than ever before of what a gift St. Francis was and is to the Church—as an example of one who so brilliantly performed “the gospel life” with both passion and authenticity.

Reviewed by the Rev. Richard Simpson, Rector of St. Francis Church in Holden