

## Why Francis Attracts Me

At first it was an instinct that I couldn't yet define. Now I realise that part of it was an inbuilt resistance to being restricted by reason/logic. Within such parameters there isn't much room for poetry, free roaming imagination or creativity. Francis could never breathe in such an environment: e.g. he had great respect and reverence for the splendour of Monastic liturgy - but it wasn't his way. He needed the tiny space of Portiuncola - to keep his feet on the ground.

Logic says it is evil to claim to be of God... Jesus made this claim??? The fact that it happens to be true was not considered. I heard a judge say of a man on trial - *he is a predator, a thief, dishonest and a menace to society - but he could well be telling the truth!*

I think I was attracted by Francis because he would have time for people like me; accepting me as I am. It is part of our Christian heritage to become even more than we are through Grace - *able to be intimate with God* - but I need the environment of being first accepted as I am - especially accepting myself in this way.

Francis broke with his father over this - and there is no evidence that they were ever reconciled. Would I have accepted him in his eccentricity - wandering the streets as a beggar when he had a perfectly good home and business? He was a social outcast, denying himself so many good things readily available. If I'm serious about finding out - there are many such people around today?

The bottom line - his own personal awareness of himself, one that brought him freedom, was a fool's paradise to others. Have I the courage to choose to be seen as foolish to preserve my real identity; or would I succumb to peer pressure and remain unfulfilled? It depends on how much I really want the freedom to be myself. It won't be enough for it to be a *strongly felt* desire - it will need to be *heart-felt*. When Jesus was attacked and ridiculed, he didn't defend himself - he simply made a statement: *I know where I come from, I know where I am going...* and he could only say that by being fully himself - *the beloved of Abba*.

Logic can, on occasion, be a good teacher: *God is only love; Love creates only lovely things; Love created me - therefore...?* Can I complete that without hesitation? And yet that is why God is with us in Jesus - to convince me that I really am lovely, that I am loved - and there is nothing I can do to stop this! This tells me where my true identity lies; the challenge is for me to accept what is being freely offered - *to become a fool for Christ's sake...* Jesus leaves me free: I can listen to him, and try to believe him; I can crucify him if that is my desire, whatever it takes for me eventually to believe. This is what makes Francis lovable - he was foolish enough to believe it.

The *Enlightenment* challenged us to know... but what kind of knowing? Is it processing information, being logical and reasonable? Is there knowledge beyond the reach of reason, what Pascal had in mind when he wrote: *The heart has reasons of which the mind knows nothing!* It isn't anything to do with are you for the head or the heart - rather is it to do with how these two actually fit together. The head belongs in the heart. My mind does not create - it discovers.

Within the whole of me - of life and love and value - reason, my mind, discovers both its place and its limits. The greatest rational act is to recognise that I am not just rational. To live solely by reason is to discover so much irrelevance; with a constant need to update. Whereas, with Pascal, there are *eternal truths* built into the fabric of humanness itself, which are never out of date: made in God's image, to love and be loved, and to revel in the environment that encourages and allows this. Such value can never be reduced into *norms for community living*. What is crucial to them is that this unique reality needs the uniqueness of the individual to become a fully alive experience.

Wisdom means all that is best of heart and mind available to personal uniqueness. We have been degraded by consumer values, enslaved by technology - not the fault of either - but of an arrogance on our part that has dispensed with honesty of purpose, so that we cannot or will not see the wrong turning we have made. Is there even room in me for *eternal truths*? It is sobering to realise that so often our everyday living has the hall mark of practical atheism: *I'm doing it my way* - and even seeing this as virtue! In letting the symbols disappear we lost also the reality they symbolised.

Eternal truths - transcendent - are real; and denying them or having no place for them, does not nullify them. We see them surfacing from time to time through various fascinations - to be fascinated by something, no matter what, is to be taken out of self temporarily, to become totally absorbed in whatever it is - even for just a few moments.

How is this an eternal truth? To be lifted out of self - to transcend self, no matter how briefly, is to be as God is permanently. God is totally self-emptying - God never gives less than all. All this prompts a realising that the purely rational on its own is not nearly big enough for full living. The Enlightenment did not leave us with *rational atheists*, but a society of troubled people, plagued by self-doubt.

We are reaping the bitter fruits of planning with only ourselves in mind. We need an attitude for the environment, not because we will suffer otherwise, but because we are that part of one creation able to know where we are from and where we are going, and how to get there - we have a responsibility to live in such fashion that encourages this to happen. As gifted with heart and mind we have the responsibility of living in the world in ways that let this happen unconditionally for all creation, respecting what deserves respect in its own right.

This will only happen through awareness of the fundamental unity proper to all creation - that there is a basic harmony proper to all creation; so that each belongs in its own way. This was Francis' insight. Through his attentiveness to the Word [obedience] he discovered that this eternal Word, who is Jesus Christ, saw himself as brother to Francis - friar Christ with friar Francis, opening up to Abba as a beloved. If the Word that is responsible for all creation calls me brother - then everything else that owes its origin to the Word must have this same quality of sister/brother, so that *the whole world is my friary; where sisters and brothers live*.

Fear is the great obstacle to such freedom - locked into my room, at least lets me know where I am; though not where I should be. I will never know peace as long as I am in denial, when I am

denying what in fact I really long for, because I'm afraid. The Gospel starts and ends with *do not be afraid*. There will be no harmony until we accept our responsibility to listen to the Word on behalf of all creation together, and to welcome the power it offers to unloose and set free.

Francis didn't *think this through*, he virtually tripped over it, when he realised that *owning* was getting in the way of his seeking, so he simply let go, thinking this was all there was to it. What came as a surprise to him was, having set free all that he owned, all this came back to him in a new way - no more as owner and occupied, but now as sisters and brothers of the one Abba, through friar Christ.

He tried very hard to communicate this new found value to others - he wrote about it, he sang about it... yet felt frustrated, until he realised that the only valid meeting place for him and his world was himself - not to talk about or shout about fraternity, but literally to live it - to be brother. Our challenge is to respect - not to go back to primitive ways. It is often asked what would Francis do if he was here today - he would be completely lost; he doesn't belong - he belongs in C13. We have to let Francis die, so that his mission will be complete. These are our times and it is ours to respond to Grace.

Science and Technology are part of nature's ways. But they cannot be allowed *carte blanche*. There has to be room for not just can we do this... but should we do it. For this to be done responsibly we need to be in touch with the Word through whom all comes to be, to hear and heed. The basis of judgement has to be value and not just convenience or profit.

*Francis [1182-1226] baptised Giovanni, given name Francis by his father who was trading in France. He was poetic, passionate, ambitious, a natural leader, a party goer. Fought for Assisi against Perugia - imprisoned for a year; took ill and was ransomed by his father; enlisted in Papal army, and at Spoleto had the dream: was he serving the master or the servant? Returned to former life, didn't work-out. Lived for months in a cave - soul searching - plus conversion and a changed attitude towards lepers. In 1205 praying before crucifix in SD - "go and repair my church, which you see is in ruins..." obeyed literally, using his father's money, lead to confrontation with his father in front of the Bishop... Strips and symbolically returns to original innocence [when there was harmony within nature] He was a loyal non-conformist; naturally generous and sympathetic...*

Francis learned to recognise God as the higher authority, no longer is my father Pietro Bernadone, but *Our Father who art in heaven...* What this felt like was, no longer a child, but an adult child... freely accepting dependence now, whereas there is no choice in infancy; now he freely chooses what he had no choice over previously; recognising the truth in simple humility - we are not self-starting, nor self-fulfilled. Interesting that he always saw himself as - *your little child and servant* - but what his brethren saw was *our holy father*. In this coming of age, childhood simplicity [not naiveté] remained in a spontaneous acceptance of Scripture, and the natural simplicity which had him describe the colour of his garb as like the *lark's wings*.

When he heard Mt.10.7-10 read at Mass –

*As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belt, no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep.*-he said - *this is what I long for with all my heart.*

He had an instinct for good - always putting goodness first; some have asked why did he see so much goodness, because he went looking for it, knowing it was there to be found. When the local priest was criticised for co-habiting he said *I know nothing of stains on his hands, I recognise the power and efficacy they have been given by the Lord*, and he kissed them... In Francis there is a remarkable harmony between the one and the many. Never has there been such a unique individual, yet one whose life only made sense as being brother.

His charism is unrepeated elsewhere - where honest and humble acceptance of self as gift, led to accepting the given awareness of God in intimacy: *in creating him, God gave him to himself; in saving him, God gave himself to him; in making him holy, God gave him to God*. It was said of him by Celano [2Cel.102] - *one who sets self to know Scripture will move more easily from self-awareness to knowledge of God*. For him the Word is the explanation of the self he was aware of and the hidden self which he was to become. Perhaps the stigmata symbolised the harmony of the two. Paradoxically, this profound self-awareness was only possible through his being brother.

He was wrong in his attitude to his body - *brother ass* - which didn't sit well with his love for creation. He reacted strongly against individualist friars... ordering one to place money in dung with his mouth; and another to have his cowl burned because he didn't ask permission - and this from one who vindicated always the dignity of the individual. He was a man without power, humble and gentle - yet full of authority - that of genuine humanity - he had moved from the experience of power to the power of experience.

When asked how he understood *Almighty God* he answered: *a helpless baby, clinging to a human breast*. He had seen how *power-over* destroys freedom; whereas authority edifies - care and compassion are best experienced in one of genuine authority, authority that appeals to freedom - so much was this real for him that he said: *even beasts and animals have authority over us*.

Genuine self-knowledge lets us into the world of animal and plant life - in the sense that we all belong, because of our common origin. So powerful was this in him that attracted response from nature, knowing that it has nothing to fear. Whereas the less we know about ourselves, the less able are we to communicate.

## **Creation**

Some experiencing cannot be expressed in words. As Wittgenstein prophesied *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent*. Some experiences can be shared, but only in their own special language... such is fascination, an unfamiliar use of the familiar. It is easy to misread

genuine simplicity - e.g. Draper's rendering of *All Creatures of our God and King*... This purports to be a translation of the Cantic of Brother Sun - yet nowhere are the words sister/brother mentioned - the very point of the Cantic.

He never saw himself apart from creation as a whole, nor was there any need in him to foster relationships; he was graced with knowing he already belonged and recognised how everything fitted into friar Christ. Christ claims him as brother so that he could know God as Father. Relationships issue from love and in this way do we open ourselves to the future. Creativity is realised through an increase in being, causing something more to exist that wasn't there before.

This is where the contemplative dimension matters, it is not just reserved for a one-to-one with God, but with everything that is *of God*. The quality of contemplative living is the absence of selfishness, or of any ulterior motivation; nor is there any blurring of the individual, no being lost in the presence of the all. This is genuine communion, which always differentiates and personalises. [Sadly, so many experiences we normally have of the *common good* is all too often at the expense of losing individuality].

We belong in Creation, and are called into union with its origin and through this into communion with each other, which, because it is founded on love will always differentiate and personalise. In this way we can celebrate the truth and goodness other than our own, now made present through unselfish belonging. The fruit of such living is a growing awareness of the wonder and beauty of genuine self-love, since love of another is love of self, the most profound experience of harmony.

When I say *I love you* in a sincere way, the words are creative, identifying an ongoing *something more* than was there before; there is no repetition. If one person truly loves another there is no reason why this love cannot have universal application. If we are attentive to the instances of our loving, our mission would be the more easily all-embracing. We can be callous and unkind, yet never lose the capacity for love. This is a reminder that humankind is not just the object of physical and scientific laws. Genes and genetics foster culture, but cannot determine *what* happens within that culture - speech makes language possible but does not determine what is said.

Creativity operates beyond data available to our senses; such things as poetry and the arts in general... and more specially devotion, prayer and loving. We are made of matter and spirit, and they are capable of great harmony. It is in this coming together we find that spark of divine intention ever seeking to burst into flame. It is when we are able to transcend *the taken for granted* - e.g. to be captivated by just a single flower, to notice the texture of rain... to find ourselves grateful for who we are and where we are.

Every experience of beauty, truth, love, harmony and goodness also carries its own pain, in as much as there is always an end, a dying. The music fades, the lover is gone... We are locked into stories that have a beginning a middle and an end - so much so that find it difficult to contain a story that doesn't have an ending - Jesus risen! Such suffering can create compassion instead of bitterness. Would I have been better served if I had never heard the music... if I had never loved?

Without the music, the poetry, the loving we surely would have no suffering of loss - but equally no joy through loveliness either! It is better to be than not; to look into the eyes of another and find acceptance than to forego this. This is why faith in life through death has us long for the ultimate transcending of limitation of whatever kind. Many wonder at the fine detail Francis used in writing the Canticle of the Sun, yet the sun was his enemy when he wrote it. His diseased eyes couldn't take any sunlight. He was able to write the truth about Creation because he was secure in being one with it. *It is only with the heart that we can see rightly; the essential is invisible to the eye* [ Fox to the Little Prince].

We begin to realise what is deep within when we are surprised by love - when experience virtually forces us to realise we are lovable. This is the Parable of the Talents - the one hidden talent unique to each one - that we are uniquely lovable, and it is a travesty to respond to this with a *one size fits all* love. To experience freedom is not just accepting myself, but realising I am a unique and unrepeatable contribution to Creation. Such integration is never surface living. There are rules: accepting reality - i.e. open to the truth that I am of God, and that this will show from time to time - most especially when I discover I am lovable. It requires not just accepting God's Word, *but God's meaning of God's Word* - not as easy as it sounds! It requires some form of contemplation.

This often offers itself as Gospel Poverty the urge to settle for nothing less than everything - to let go of all that is not all; and so having nothing to defend allows me to be open to life as it is: *whoever would save his life must lose it*. This avoids us living solely by what is rational, and opens us up to the vastness of reality. Before prayer means saying something, it has to mean being someone: *Francis did not so much pray as become a prayer*. This what hearing God's Word and God's meaning of God's Word means. The Word always brings with it the invitation and the Grace for us to become what we hear.

Does it matter how God sees God and me? Does it matter that the Lord wants to *wash my feet*? Do I believe my unworthiness and my sin does not remove God's love - though it inhibits me from experiencing it fully?

Why did the disciples - devout Jews - ask Jesus to teach them to pray? They saw him pray - that he was his prayer; that he was showing them how to discover Abba, and themselves as beloved of Abba - this meant accepting who God is for them and who they are for each other. To pray *Our Father...* means being someone before saying something. This awareness is not passive, it invites us to become the *Amen*, our yes to the self God would have us be. This is the open door giving us access to ourselves and all that is not ourselves as already belonging.

Organised Religion is to encourage and facilitate our awareness of this. The world-wide malaise is more spiritual than anything else; we are out of touch with where we come from, and so have no idea where we are going. There are well-known techniques for coping with stress - from both East and West - but they are not prayer and cannot replace prayer. Prayer means face-to-face with the reality of God; and because it is the Spirit praying in us, rather than ourselves praying, the reality is authentic since the Spirit prays in God's own language. It isn't the task of prayer simply

to teach us to relax and be rid of stress - prayer is saying yes to God's request to be with us so as to make us aware of Abba and ourselves as the beloved of Abba: *I will listen to what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* - Ps.85.8.

They saw Jesus being the beloved, being himself; consciously resting within the relationship of Father and Son. *Anything you ask in my name* - often causes questions. I've asked in Jesus' name and nothing seems to happen! Asking in Jesus' name has a new significance. There are surely people in our lives who matter enough to take us out of ourselves - their well-being is uppermost. It doesn't so much intrude into our consciousness as we invite it in. It could be sheer joy at some good-fortune they experience, or distress at something sad happening to them; whatever it is, it is now part of me. This leads me into the real way of prayer - when I am by choice there for God. This *me* is carrying my concerns for others as part of me - all of this is present to God. I am not there to alert God to where help is needed, but to allow myself to be alerted to it ever more deeply - heightened sensitivity to the needs of others - effectively to become the answer to my own prayer.

What we usually call *distractions* could well be the opposite. If creation, in some form, is intruding - remember Creation is of God and speaks of its origin. But there are times when we would like to be alone with God. When the crickets were very noisy outside the chapel Francis went and said: *Let me praise God in peace for a while, and then you can have your turn*. Keeping ourselves focussed we sometimes find difficult - yet when we are enjoying the company of a friend we don't have this problem! Does this say anything to me about what my prayer really is for me - am I here to do something or to be with someone?

The invitation to pray is not so much to apply our minds as to energise our will-power... then no matter how much my mind wanders, I am still with... I need to remind myself that I do not end at the circumference of my body - I continue outwards through relationships, even into intimacy with God. *Homo sapiens* becomes *homo amans*, through *homo orans*.

There is no substitute for being with. The whole point of the *Our Father* is that we belong. Prayer not only shows us there is nowhere to hide, but that there is no need for it. It is the antithesis of what we read in Genesis: *I hid you coming and hid myself...* No matter how I see myself, God delights in seeing me. Francis was put off by the unsightliness etc. of the leper until he looked specifically for the person, no matter what the covering. How can I own God as Abba and disown those whom Abba gives as sisters and brothers? *You became responsible for what you have tamed; you are responsible for your rose* [Fox to the Little Prince]. Everyone is called to enjoy God, but not everyone knows it... do I see Gospel poverty as *lady*, or death as *sister*? Why do we desire love to last forever? Or where does the idea of *always... forever...* come from?

### **Jesus-Word-Friar**

The reality of God-with-us is Jesus Christ. *Holy God* means no discrepancy between who God is and what God wills. God is so completely *other* - infinitely beyond any of our experiencing, yet totally appealing. No past or future in God, no passing from one state to another - God *is* - is unchangingly always new. *God is new every morning* - Lam.3.25.

I have an ever-increasing past, I am never totally present to myself, there is more to me than this moment. How can I speak of God - some call God *Sun, Beauty, Truth, Good...* but for me, God is Jesus from Nazareth - the baby lying in the straw, totally dependent, had to be taught; who learned how to fashion wood - this is the Lord of Creation! He crawled on the ground in terror, experienced total isolation - *my God, why...* before dying as a criminal.

Those who looked at him simply saw a tired man in a boat, thirsty by the well, crying with a grieving widow - a body cold and limp being buried. Would I have believed? People like Bernard and Francis saw him like this. In OT God was seen from the *outside*, through impact on Creation and with them in their history - with the birth of Jesus, we now see from the inside. The mystery of God has become the mystery of man. The shepherds weren't afraid - a baby doesn't frighten; no fear with Mary, John and Magdalene on Calvary - just a dying man.

God's free and eternal will was to have one who is outside God, yet could love God worthily. Sin didn't determine the Incarnation, simply the manner of it. Consummated love is the supreme motive:

*And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

Col.1.17.

Francis wasn't the first to identify his Order by brotherhood - S Basil in C5 did so - but what was unique to Francis was *friar Christ*. Because Christ is the Word, and also brother, then all that issues from that Word enjoys that belonging of sister and brother to friar Christ and God as Abba. The *human* is Creation aware of itself. When we pray *our* we own this belonging; and when we say *father* we are as God intended, children of Abba. This is Creation's prayer; when we ask to be forgiven we remember that earth, air, fire and water have been sinned against too. What can we do to redeem our planet? Simply to live in it so as to let it be as its Maker intended.

### **Death and Resurrection**

Because we are a *unity* of matter and spirit death doesn't just affect the body. It is the human being, the incarnate spirit who dies; as it is the human being who rises from death. During our life-time we are moving ever closer to Christ-like living, and this change reaches its first part in death. Through faith and in death the body is transformed - eventually all is transformed in the new heaven and the new earth.

Death doesn't make me a disembodied spirit. Death changes my relationship with reality from a flesh-body relationship to a spirit-body relationship. Resurrection is of the whole person - being with others and for others, an existence entirely made up of relationships. Jesus' Resurrection is the central truth of faith. He is risen and was recognised as the same person - though his manner of presence was changed.



## **Peace-Pardon-Suffering**

Francis wrote to the friars at the Pentecost Chapter:

*Since you speak of peace, all the more so must it be in your hearts. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal by you, rather be you drawn to peace and good will through harmony, concord and gentleness. We have been called to heal, to unite what has fallen apart, to bring home those who have lost their way. Many who appear to be children of the devil will yet come to be disciples of Christ... [3Comp.941]*

*Peace is an order founded on truth, built upon justice, nurtured and animated by Charity, and brought into effect through freedom - John XXIII Pacem in Terris*

Why is there suffering? Why cancer, muggings..? Why did there have to be a cross? Even Jesus cried out *My God, why...* Suffering is not a problem - problems can be solved - suffering is mysterious, always more questions than answers. We are mortal, creatures moving towards death and suffering is its companion. If I deny God because of unjust suffering, what happens next? Nothing but cold, stoic futility. Deny God and get on with suffering, the grim companion of our mortality. The difficulty only exists for the believer. Why does a good God allow this? In the face of so much overwhelming factual evidence why do people still believe?

Set the question of suffering within the context of Creation in process, then we can locate it - even though we don't understand it. Evolution means survival of the fittest. If we see creation like sowing seed - then we can understand set-backs and failures. There is risk in creation - the abuse of freedom. For the believer it is God who sustains creation, saving it from annihilation, but not from its own creatureliness; but no matter how many species die out, being prevails over nothingness.

Impose the mechanical model and pain and suffering can never become mystery - simply remain intolerable. Only a foolish craftsman would build an imperfect model. But the question remains: *Is this the best God can do? Couldn't God create an evolving universe without pain and suffering?* It's a very real question.

On the one hand, God is nothing else but love, on the other a universe creating itself. Could this happen without pain? If God allows this how is God good, if God can't do anything about it, how is God Almighty? There is an answer, but not in the realm of logic. God's will to create is the key. Creation is not one option among many.

This is what happens when God creates. Suffering belongs to it, and God experienced this in the Incarnation. God and humankind work to rid creation of suffering, and because of this partnership goodness will ultimately be vindicated.

That haunting comment from Jesus when questioned about healing the blind man: *It wasn't that this man sinned, not his parents, but that the works of God become apparent in him - Jn.9.1.* Sickness and pain do have redeeming qualities: *In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions,*

*for the sake of the body [the Church]... Col.1.24. what cannot be avoided is not just to be bearable, but can be redemptive through Grace and generosity. Unavoidable suffering need not diminish us; the purpose of the Sacrament of the sick reminds us that infirmity and ill-health are not just *body* states, but *person* states. Grace doesn't have us simply endure pain, but also helps us overcome it. There is no health without personal peace.*

One of the greatest human gifts is to be able to say *thank-you!* Gratitude results from experiencing the need for it. To allow it expression requires humility - recognising that life and its talents are gifts shared. Francis praised God because he was a humble man - he stood in God's presence exactly as he was - a creature, infinitely loved by God, in need of continuing Grace. No illusions.

He was totally consumed with self-giving God – everyone, everything, all creation is gift – freely given, most especially by God coming to us *by giving us someone to love – a helpless child clinging to a human breast.*