

## Francis and Human Liberation

### Anselm SSF

What does the unending quest for the historical Francis have to say, across seven centuries, to us - to post-modern humanity? Thomas of Celano wrote down all he could assemble of memories and records of Francis; a Francis who could only serve to emphasise the differences between his followers. Bonaventure set himself to portray a Francis who would unite the Order in the service of the church in her struggles with heresy and with Islam. Later, Paul Sabatier produced a Protestant Francis; and in the flurry of celebration around 1926, the septcentenary of the saint's death, we find many biographies which gave the post 1918 generation Francis, the channel of God's peace.

Of course, we still pray for peace - but we live with a growing awareness that there can be no peace without justice. This awareness is facilitated by the speed and ease with which news (truth as well as falsehood) travels - accelerated by the technology which transfers money in the service of the trading system for the enrichment of the rich and the impoverishment of the poor.

This injustice results in the death of a baby on the African continent every three seconds. What has the church, what has theology, to say to us who are caught up in this tragedy - particularly those of us with a passion for justice? In the context of Franciscan studies can we find a Francis who brings to the human dilemma the liberating truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, his Lord and ours?

In Latin America thirty years ago appeared the true church - of the poor. Base Ecclesial Communities were its local incarnation; its theological grounding was in the teaching of Gutierrez, Segundo, Sobrino and others; leadership and support came from sympathetic bishops. Its authenticity was sealed by the blood of its martyrs - most notably, Oscar Romero.

BECs have largely disappeared, Romero was not canonised, sympathetic bishops were replaced by conservatives - but Liberation Theology continues to influence black, feminist, and Asian successors.

And Francis? Francis found an advocate in Leonardo Boff of the Order of Friars Minor who was born in 1938 in Brazil, who studied there and in post war Munich, and who wrote 20 books. The first, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, appeared in 1979. It was followed (1981) by *Francis, a Model of Human Liberation*.

Boff worked among the Brazilian poor, dispossessed victims of the unbridled capitalism of the rich north, in a society rent apart by this poverty. For him, the gospel brought liberation from oppression as the first task of the church, and (in Jungian terms) integration of the human psyche. For him, Francis, in his person but not in his followers, embodied the exposé of capitalism, the healing of society, freedom from the bondage of greed, a church continually reborn, and a whole humanity, the image of the Creator.

Boff has many critics who point to his adoption of the Marxist world view, and his advocacy of a church without wealth and without male dominance. After a decade of intellectual harassment by ecclesiastical authority he left the priesthood and the Franciscan Order. The same decade saw the collapse of Soviet communism, and the wane of Base Ecclesial Communities. But many of the issues with which Boff wrestled remain urgent, so his Francis is still of compelling interest to those who work to make poverty history and to protect our planet from the inroads of human greed.

In the first chapter of *Francis, a Model of Human Liberation*, Boff sees the early 80's as a time of crisis for bourgeois consumerist capitalism, with its values of reason and productivity at the expense of passion for people and for the rest of creation. The end result of this for the 'rich' is disillusion and spiritual emptiness. In Francis we see one who can fill the void: '... a man of God, he always lived what is essential. And so he was simple, courteous and gentle with everyone, like God in his mercy'.

An overview of the life of Francis shows him to be one in whom 'logos' is given true life by 'eros'. As he approaches death he composes and sings the Canticle of Brother Sun, an expression of the friendly union that he established with all things. Our present day culture finds in Francis a great deal of that for which we hunger and thirst.

Chapter Two considers the rift which divides rich from poor. So long as the evil of global poverty resulting from unfair trading practices persists, so long is humanity divided. This is the great rift in human society to which Francis by his life brought healing. He was, by origin, rich; yet he undertook a 'radical disappropriation' which Boff finds asserted and celebrated in the story of 'Perfect Joy'. To accept willingly the role of the outcast, to retain nothing, this is perfect joy. The story of Francis passes under review from this perspective - the parting with his father, the embracing of the lepers, the insistence on radical poverty in the Order. The detachment of poverty grew into a great liberation of love and the disinterested enjoyment of all things.

Chapter Three describes the contribution of Francis to the integral liberation of the oppressed. 'The liberation theme must be sought in categories such as poverty, love, rule, authority, fraternity, money, obedience, the Saracens - above all in the option for the poor.' Courtesy, availability, humble service, gentleness, compassion are forms of communication that humanise and liberate. 'True liberty is realised when an individual has decided to live with all creatures, independent of their situation, serving them courteously, even the animals.'

Chapter Four gives us the implications of Francis' life for the church of God. As the splendidly vested body of Innocent III awaited burial, thieves stole the silks and braid. Francis covered the naked corpse with his own patched habit, and thus enacted a parable of his position in the church. He was, at once, radical revolutionary and obedient child. He lived the antithesis of the dominating endeavour of the church, yet was obedient to the papacy.

In the final chapter Boff writes of Francis as one who in his lifetime achieved the Jungian ideal of integrated individuation. Clare was a major factor in his coming to terms with his 'anima' and 'animus' so that in death he found a friend and sister. In conclusion - 'contact with Francis produces profound crisis. We discover ourselves imperfect. Francis is new, we are old. Francis is more than an idea, he is spirit and a way of life'.

In the quarter century since the appearance of *Francis, a Model of Human Liberation* the goal posts in church and world have all moved, and Francis is in need of a new and radical interpreter. The voice of Francis is audible in the counsels of the United Nations, in New York and in Geneva -Franciscans International. We lack, however, a prophetic Franciscan voice with the courage to speak radically with and for the poor, as did Leonardo Boff in his generation. *f*

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