

**“Let us bless the Lord, living and true”
the prayer of Francis and the early brothers
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On a recent visit to Assisi, I again found one of the most moving relics of Francis of Assisi is his prayer book, the thirteenth century breviary closely written and battered by constant use, treasured for centuries by the Poor Clares to whom it was given by Br Leo, Francis' companion and secretary. As the Rule for Hermitages reminds us, the prayer life of the early brothers was built round the prayer of the daily office; indeed together with the readings heard at Mass it provided their only immediate access to the scriptures and the writings of the early church fathers.

The Earlier Rule (slowly compiled through experience during 1209-1221) tells us that "all the brothers, whether clerical or lay, recite the divine office, the praises and the prayers, as is required of them" (*FA:ED* 1.65) [All text references are taken from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents Vol 1* edited by Armstrong, Hellman and Short]. Well, we know what the divine office was - it was the portable form devised for the travelling officials of the papal court, which the Franciscans greatly popularised. But what are the 'praises and prayers' to which the brothers were also committed? Fortunately, we have some twenty prayer texts which scholars judge as authentic and deriving from Francis although, as with many of the texts ascribed to him, he needed a secretary to write them down, (his Latin wasn't too good!) and he often incorporated ideas and words from brothers around him. We can see that every prayer bar one is in plural form. The only exception is the 'Prayer before the Crucifix' of San Damiano which is first person singular and probably dates from 1205/6, the beginning of the process of Francis' conversion.

When we come to ask the question what kind of prayers are they - these prayers of Francis, some of which formed part of the daily devotions of the brothers, presumably learnt by heart for an itinerant and begging life? We get some kind of answer from analysing the words used. Yes, as we would expect, the word 'pray' comes frequently (25 times), more surprisingly the standard words for prayer are infrequent: contemplate (1), meditate (2), supplicate (2), intercede (2). The words which are used are: adore (20), honour (25), praise (26), magnify (6), exalt (12), give thanks (21), bless (15), glorify (2), serve (7). So, it is quite clear that the prayer life of the early brothers was centred around the recognition of God's gifts to them and all creation and their responsive role was both in the deepening of their sense of praise and thanksgiving and through the service of identification with those excluded from the power and possessions of the city and commune of Assisi. The response did not take one of the existing forms of monastic life but rather the lifestyle of the many penitential movements of their time.

The Earlier Rule (*FA:ED1.63-86*) concludes with an extraordinary paean of praise and thanksgiving which runs to 165 lines in the modern edition and has been used as a basis for compiling a Franciscan eucharistic prayer.

The Earlier Rule describes the content of the life in which this spirituality of praise is to be lived out. After "selling all his belongings" and "giving everything to the poor" the brothers are to live the Gospel and as wanderers to be agents of peace both in their own society and beyond, for example with non-believers and "Saracens". They earn their living through the work of their own hands for what is necessary for them and to help feed the sick especially lepers. They are to be "lesser brothers" who do not own the places where they dwell, dress poorly, refuse ownership, exercise no power, and above all they identify with the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside (cf *FA:ED1.70*).

Of course, it was a constant struggle to maintain this level of commitment. It is clear from the Earlier Rule that what we might call 'devotional practices': daily office, Mass, fasting, praises and prayers were seen as a constant reaffirmation of the values of Francis and the ever-increasing number of brothers and sisters who formed what we might call the Franciscan movement - only later would it take the form of the three Orders. Chapter 23 of the Earlier Rule (*FA:ED1.79-81*), largely made up of a selection of verses from the Gospels, shows how difficult it was, in Francis' words "to walk in the footsteps of Jesus" rather than returning to the world and the values of Assisi. As David Flood OFM comments, "Their prayer kept their minds from becoming entangled in the world. It withdrew their inchoate self from the press of society and kept it subject to God's action in the world" (Francis and the Franciscan Movement). It was precisely to help and sustain this attitude that Francis wrote the "Rule for those who live in Hermitages".

If there is one word which encapsulates what Francis and Franciscans believe is the most characteristic description of God, it is the simple word good: "Let us give back all good to the Lord - acknowledge that every good is his, and thank him from whom all good comes, for everything ... all thanks and glory, to whom all good belongs, he who alone is good. When we see or hear evil spoken or done or God blasphemed, let us bless and do good and praise God who is blessed forever". (Earlier Rule Ch 17 -*FA:ED 1.76*). Sacred and secular are not to be divided or one thought to be better than the other. Each is the location of God's activity and God's call to each of us to share in the process of returning all good things, all creation, to its loving Creator. Prayer and life are interwoven in terms of love and service and are expressed through adoration, praise and giving glory. There is no time or place where prayer and praise cannot be lived and in the doing of it we become part of that furnace of love and service, which the creation and every human being mirrors, which we call the Triune God.

"Wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of the day, everyday and continually, let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honour, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High and Supreme Eternal God, Trinity

and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Saviour of all who believe and hope in Him and love Him" (Earlier Rule Ch 23 [FA:ED1.85-86]). *f*



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