

Inspiration Letters – Saints edition

Joy through renunciation - the life and times of Francis of Assisi

by Abhinabha Tangerman



St Francis of Assisi - feeding the birds

Once a beggar woman knocked on the door of the small church where Saint Francis of Assisi was praying together with his monk brothers. She humbly asked for alms, but the only possession the monks had was an old bible. “Give her that!” Saint Francis exclaimed. “I am sure our Lord will be more pleased by that than if we read it ourselves.”

Saint Francis knew that there is more joy in giving than in taking. He also knew that if you possess nothing, you have nothing to lose. “Lady Poverty exposes the greed and worries of the world,” he once said.

Sweetness in soul and body

Although Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) is perhaps the best known saint in the Christian world, his early life showed little signs of sainthood. Francis was born the son of a rich Italian textile merchant and grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth. He loved wine, parties and women and indulged his privileged life lavishly.

His transformation occurred when he rode by a leper one day. Something made him stop, descend from his horse and approach the sufferer. A strong inner feeling compelled him to grab the leper’s festering hand and kiss it. Instead of revulsion Francis felt a deep bliss. “What seemed bitter to me at first turned into sweetness in soul and body,” he later commented.

A few days later he collected a large sum of money, rode to a leprosy and distributed the wealth among all the lepers, kissing their hands as they received it. He felt such joy in his selfless act that he decided to renounce his life of wealth and luxury and to devote himself entirely to a life of divine compassion, simplicity and poverty.

The last hurdle to his spiritual life was his father, who stood vehemently against his son's decision. Furious, he sued his son for stealing his money and giving it away to the lepers. The local bishop summoned Francis to return the money to his father. Without missing a beat Francis took off his expensive clothes, put his purse on top and placed the bundle at the feet of his father, saying, "Up until now I have always called you my father, but from now on I only recognise our heavenly Father." His father left in a huff, but the bishop was deeply impressed with Francis' courage and sacrifice.

A thin rag for bedding

With great zeal Francis moved into his new life as a wandering monk and renunciate. His devotion to Lady Poverty was absolute. Anyone that wanted to follow him had to sell all his possessions, give them away to the poor and vow to never possess anything else during his entire life. That also included book knowledge. Francis felt that worldly knowledge led seekers away from the true wisdom that prayer provided.

He called his order the *frater minores* or 'little brothers'. Because a house was also deemed a possession the little brothers slept in an old barn with nothing but a thin rag for bedding, even in winter. When a farmer came to claim the barn the brothers left immediately.

Preaching, singing and begging Francis and his little brothers wandered from town to town through the North Italian countryside. With their torn clothes, ragged appearance and bare feet they looked like beggars and were often mocked and ridiculed. Instead of losing heart, the mockery strengthened Francis' resolve. When once asked what true joy was to him he replied, "If I would be returning from Perugia on a dark winter night through the mud and my legs would bleed from the icicles at the edges of my habit, and if I would knock twice at the door of our church and would be sent away twice, and if I would knock for the third time and would be told to go to another monastery, I tell you that if I kept patience and was not upset—that is true joy and true virtue and salvation of the soul."

A new kind of fool

Despite his unorthodox behaviour Saint Francis became immensely popular. He was blessed with acting talent and also possessed great charisma and a keen sense of humour with which he turned his public sermons into lively theatrical performances. Combined with his inner wisdom acquired through endless hours of prayer and the joy that visibly radiated from his face he attracted large crowds everywhere he went.

As one of the first saints Francis also accepted women to have an order in his name. The first woman among his followers was the 17-year-old Clara of Favarone, who later founded the Order of Poor Ladies.

Yet Francis' popularity also posed challenges. Among his growing order of followers his ideals of simplicity and poverty proved increasingly difficult to maintain. Some of his new and influential followers as well as the Catholic church, to which Francis was deeply

devoted, thought his ideas were too extreme. But Francis didn't budge. At one occasion he discovered several little brothers building a house. Furious at their disobedience he climbed the roof and started dislodging the roofing tiles and throwing them down. Another time when a high ranking cardinal tried to persuade him to tone down his renunciation, he took the man by the hand, led him to the centre of the congregation and spoke to the assembled crowd, "My brothers! God has called me to go the path of simplicity and I do not want you to continue forcing another rule unto me. The Lord has told me he wanted me to be a new kind of fool and He does not want us to be guided by any higher form of wisdom." With his characteristic zeal he added, "God will punish you for your knowledge and I trust His accomplices will make you pay dearly." The cardinal was stupefied.

Although Saint Francis was undoubtedly aware of the hypocrisy of priests and cardinals who valued wealth, power and prestige above christian values, he refused to judge their imperfections and instructed his brothers to always respect the cloth, no matter how uncouth their behaviour might be.

Brother fire, lower your heat!

To Francis obedience to the divine Will was the highest virtue. During his prayers and meditations he sometimes heard the voice of God. But He also experienced the divine guidance in the ordinary events of daily life. Each incidence to him was full of meaning. When questions or issues pressed him, he used to open up the bible to a random page and take the text he read there as his answer.

Francis liked to lead by example. Once when he was invited to a sumptuous dinner at the palace of a cardinal friend, he went round to all dignitaries seated at the table and offered them the breadcrumbs he had received for alms that very day. "I have to represent your poor brothers," he later explained his unusual behaviour to his cardinal friend, "because I know some of them are too proud to lower themselves to go begging or perform other services. I get more satisfaction from sharing this meagre food than by sitting at your abundant table, for the bread of charity is sacred."

To Francis the entire creation was blessed with the divine spark. He could discern that spark in all creatures, endowing him with filial love for all. Even animals he considered his true brothers and sisters. To a braying donkey that disturbed his sermon he said, "Brother donkey, please be quiet and let me continue preaching." As legend would have it, the donkey fell silent. His best known interaction with animals is his sermon to the birds, where Francis instructs a group of birds whom he called his 'dear little sisters' to always praise God with their song.

The elements were also part of Francis' divine extended family. He sometimes communicated with them as well. At one time Francis had to undergo serious eye surgery, which in those days involved putting burning hot irons to his temples. Before the operation he prayed, "My brother fire, please be kind to me in this hour, since I have always loved you and will continue loving you. I beg our Creator that made you to lower your heat so that I will be able to bear it." Indeed, after the operation Francis said that he had felt heat nor pain.

Receiving the stigmata

Despite his joy, zeal and cheerfulness Francis' life also had its tragedies. At the end of his life he suffered from crushing tuberculosis and malaria, which caused occasional depressions. An eye infection had made him practically blind. Even more painful to him was the fact that he was unable to maintain his strict rules of renunciation and poverty among the members of his own order. The Catholic church had forced him to appoint priests, erect centers of study and live inside monasteries.

Yet the joy of his prayer life ultimately overpowered his physical and political challenges. Just two years before his death he was blessed with an unparalleled spiritual experience. One morning in the year 1224 Francis received a vision of Jesus as a crucified angel, giving him a feeling of ineffable ecstasy. After the experience faded Francis' he was indelibly marked with the stigmata, the crucifixion wounds of Jesus. His hands and feet seemed like they were pierced with nails and a bleeding wound also appeared in his side. It was a confirmation of Francis' inseparable oneness with the suffering of his Master. In later centuries more saints were blessed with the stigmata, but Francis was the first of his kind.

Francis died knowing that only very few were able to follow him in his radical renunciation, but also in the reassurance that his order would spread the virtues of simplicity and lack of possessions all over the world.

St Sylvester

by Dhiraja McBryde

I like cows. Few things give me more satisfaction than to walk or run through the green New Zealand countryside and stop and chat to its placid bovine inhabitants. Sometimes they will gather around and gaze at the strange monkey-man who actually gives them the time of day. They listen as I sing them a song. Some will lick my hand, nuzzle with their big wet noses. Some cows like to have their foreheads itched, their flanks stroked. Sometimes a herd will run with me across the paddocks – each beast a tonne on nimble (we hope) hoofs. Some individuals are particularly affectionate and will always come over for a chat when they spot me.

All this, of course, cuts into any rigorous marathon training but it is worthwhile.

So when I saw the painting I was intrigued. It was called 'The Miracle of St Sylvester' and had been painted in the 1450s by one Francesco di Stefano, known as Pesellino, a contemporary of Fra Filippo Lippi.

You can imagine the stage-like setting – a loggia with the requisite perspective lines to let the viewer know that we have left the gothic and are firmly in the new scientific world of the renaissance.

And, right in the middle of the long composition – a cow!

What else do we notice? At one end of the painting sits a woman with a crown; let us call her the queen. At the other end, a man with a funny hat sits on what can only be a throne; let us call him the king though his hat does make him look a little like Robin Hood.

There are, walking about or sitting around, various renaissance-looking folk in drapery or in tights and with Beatles mop-top haircuts but the focal point of all this painting is definitely the cow.

Is it dancing? Is it bowing? Is it standing up or getting down? Certainly its front end is lowered – one knee on the terracotta tiles of the loggia, its other front leg bent.

And kneeling in front of the cow – a man in a different sort of funny hat, a hat that I recognise as denoting him as the pope, though Pope Paul VI was the last pope to wear this particular sort of hat and that was in 1963, before I was born.

To us it is a mysterious painting, but folks in 1450 knew their saints. Seeing the painting in Florence fresh from the studio they did not need it decoded – they knew the stories.

The ‘king’ is of course the emperor Constantine, the ‘queen’ is his mum, St Helena, and the kneeling man, his papal tiara surrounded by a saintly halo, can only be Pope St Sylvester I.

The story is of how the magician – that would be the man with the red, squashy hat – demonstrated his power by whispering in the ear of ‘a cruel bull’ certain unknown phrases upon which the poor bovine fell down dead, just so much inert beef where once was such life. However, St Sylvester ‘made his orisons and prayers to our Lord and said to the bull, “I command thee bull, arise thou up and go thou with the other beasts debonairly,” and anon the bull arose and went forth softly’. This we learn from ‘The Life of St Sylvester’ written by Jacobus de Voragine in 1260.

The outcome of this story is that ... the emperor’s mum, much impressed, became a Christian – and, of course, went on to become St Helena.

Sylvester was indeed pope from 314 to 335. Did he bring a dead bull back to life as they wrote of him 900 years later?

Let us reserve judgement until we read further in ‘The Life of St Sylvester’.

The next story is that there was a dragon that lived in a pit in Rome and it burnt up 300 men every day with its fiery breath and St Sylvester sewed its mouth shut and thus saved the city.

Now, I have read enough of the writings of Sir Laurens van der Post to know that this is the kind of imagery that Jung and such-like folks very happily and easily interpret in terms of symbols and states of being and psychology and archetypes and that only hillbillies need take them as accounts of actual historical events.

And that is the beauty of the saints – they are stories. Did St Hubert really pursue a white stag; was St Kenneth, as a child, really raised by seagulls; did St James float to Spain in a stone boat ... ?

All families have stories, stories of past events, stories that cement shared experiences, the bonds of affection and belonging and oneness between family members – one great grandfather going ‘a nutting’ as a child in England; the other, walking miles each day to labour in the lime quarry; the lizard that fell out of the thatch into the porridge; grandfather

being excommunicated ... The stories are told around the table, around the fire, around the family.

And so with all groups, each spiritual path. Beyond the great stories of what the Masters and the great prophets said and did are the little stories of individuals responding to and living the ideals of the group.

These stories remind us that we are never alone. We walk the road not alone but accompanied by all the other people who have walked it before – those ‘gone before us marked with the sign of faith’.

A Buddhist writer I read put it thus – that when we sit to meditate, we should imagine a crowd, a host, of other individuals gathered with us – great spiritual luminaries, humble holy folk from the past, our ancestors in the physical world, or ancestors in the spiritual world, all delighted that we are sitting down to meditate. Supportive and encouraging, they smile on us.

It is what the Christians call ‘the body of Christ’ – all the people, living and dead, moving in the same direction with common purpose, forming one unified entity.

And the lives of the saints are the stories of this multitude. They are the stories that we tell around the campfire in the dark of a world that is often inimical to the ideals of those saints. In the light of the dancing flames we are uplifted by tales of bravery and faith and compassion and love – St Teresa of Calcutta tending the dying, St Francis casting aside all his privilege for a life of holy poverty, St Oscar Romero laying down his life for the oppressed.

And from the stories we draw inspiration and, from that, aspiration arises that we might carry on ourselves.

And so varied is the panoply of saints that there is something to appeal to everyone, everywhere at any time.

When I was 17 I took the name Anthony after the Egyptian saint from the third century of that name – hermit, mystic, father of monasticism.

When I was 30 I stood agog in a church in Budapest before a statue of St Margaret who lived on the Island of Rabbits in the blue river.

Recently it was pointed out to me that there are no words of St Joseph recorded – he is the saint of silence.

All the saints, all the stories, help us along.

And next time I meet a bull, as sometimes I do on my runs across the fields, a bull all debonair and soft, I will relate to him the story of St Sylvester.

An unknowing saint

by Mahiruha Klein

I'll never forget the first time I meditated, I really meditated. I was in my second semester of Freshman year at College, it was the first day of class, and I was waiting for the Philosophy Professor to come in, Dominick I. I didn't expect to be awed or impressed by him. After all, I had read a lot of philosophy in high school, had been on the debate team, and "knew my stuff". I thought, on the contrary, I would impress him with my wide reading and acumen!

Then he walks in, and he was a short, Italian man, with his hair combed back, elderly, liver spots on his hands, immaculately groomed, and something else-

I don't know another way to describe this, but the entire room was flooded with light when he entered. I mean, everything started breathing - the desks, the walls, the chalkboard. I could just smile and smile as I felt my body becoming lighter and lighter.

He spoke so calmly, so clearly, yet behind the words he spoke I felt an infinite calm, an infinite poise and peace, a true solid mass of joy that was his inner self.

This man was very influential in my life because as soon as I saw him, I said to myself, "I want that. I want that peace, I want that poise, I want that joy."

To the very day I die I will treasure this experience. This man prepared me to meet Guru.

It's funny, I once came to his office and told him that I see and feel light in him and he seemed so surprised! I told an older disciple that I was shocked at his surprise, that he didn't seem to know that he offered such light. My friend said that is the sign of humility. If he was preoccupied with the fact that he brought this divinity into the classroom, then that would have been the wrong attitude. Humility is a sign of real spiritual greatness. It's also one of the hardest divine qualities to get- right up there with unconditional surrender and detachment. Sri Aurobindo writes, "Therefore we know by that humility that Thou art God."

I guess because I have such a high Guru, a great God-realised soul, that my more instinctive reaction is "so what" towards saints and seers. How stupid of me! I still live in the world of name and form and relativity.

Yes, I am lucky and privileged to have a Guru who is an Avatar. I am also lucky and fortunate that I came across a genuine saint in college!

The greatest service that Dominick did for me is to convince me that God is real. With his own inner light and palpable divinity, he made me feel the presence of God. That inspired me to look for a real spiritual Master.

I like Guru's poem, from his "Seventy-Seven Thousand Service-Trees" series:

"If you are a good God-lover,
Then you are bound to love?
His chosen children:
Saints and seers, yogis and avatars."

Sri Chinmoy, [1](#)

I guess on our path we are supposed to go beyond the saints, and, in fact, even beyond the yogis. Guru implied that we can and should try to realise his own Transcendental Consciousness. That, I think, is a state beyond simple God-realisation. He writes:

"If you become my Transcendental Consciousness, then there is no one, there is nothing, either in Heaven or on earth, that will not cherish your divinity."

- Sri Chinmoy, [2](#)

He wrote a poem in the Golden Boat series (1974) that seems to embody a similar idea:

"When I aspire
God honours me.
He tells the world
That I am His fond child,
I am His choice instrument.

When I do not aspire
He also honours me.
He tells the world
That I am His future Choice,
I am His future Voice,
I shall embody His future Race,
I shall reveal His future Face."

- Sri Chinmoy, [3](#)

We have a long way to go, most of us, to become saints, but we can start here and now. As Saint Julian of Norwich said, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

--Mahiruha Klein

Reference

- [1](#). Seventy-Seven Thousand Service-Trees, part 10, Agni Press, 1998
- [2](#). Our sweetest oneness, Agni Press, 2012
- [3](#). The Golden Boat, part 16, Agni Press, 1974

Rhode Island Style St. Joseph

by Sharani Robins

When you live in a state with the highest percentage of Italian Americans in the U.S. (19%), certain cultural traditions permeate the landscape and seep into the awareness of non-Italians even if not paying close attention. Myself being the latter, this year I found myself wondering about the zeppoles (singular is zeppola) I see mentioned and advertised around Easter every year. I knew only two things about them - first that it was some kind of pastry, maybe like a donut, and second that I had no clue how to pronounce it.

In the supposed interest of healthy eating, I could not recollect ever eating one of these presumed Rhode Island traditional foods. I tried to find one last year with half-hearted effort around Easter but the bakery I went into looked at me like I was slightly crazy since it turned out they were a Polish bakery. No zeppoles for me!

Then this year I happened into an Italian bakery right near the statue of Guru and they had them! It looked like a large cream puff. I hesitantly pointed to it and asked to buy it without saying the word out loud (don't forget I have no idea how to pronounce it). I walk out of the bakery feeling like an adventurer pushing off to distant shores, saving it for the next day to learn more about it and actually eat it.

It is a pastry special for St. Joseph's Day that was created back in Italy many hundreds of years ago and eating them on St Joseph's Day (March 19th in the U.S.) is a Rhode Island tradition. Like the cherry on top, I was extra delighted to see that I was eating the zeppola on the actual holiday. What were the chances of that? I fancied myself an honorary Italian-American the same as if I wore green on St. Patrick's Day and felt Irish for a day.

As I partook of this Italian-American Catholic tradition, my thoughts turned to St. Joseph, referred to as the husband of the Virgin Mary and Jesus' legal father. I know little about him but I instantly recalled that there is a tradition of burying a statue of St Joseph upside down in the yard when you are selling your house to ensure a speedy sale/move. Some time back, my parents had done just this when they were trying to sell a house they had built in Michigan and were having trouble selling.

Coming back to the present moment, I realized that I was in the process of selling a house and buying a condominium and that I never even had a chance to invoke St. Joseph for help because it seemed I used the "Saint of Meant To Be" instead. For reasons that were in some ways obvious and in others perhaps forever a mystery, I was just following through on an inner prompting that I was supposed to sell and move. A series of seeming miracles unfolded along the way, especially when significant hurdles presented themselves at various moments in the process for this 100 year-old house somewhat in need of repair.

Me ever the writer, I composed the description for the real estate listing sites and the first day it was on the market and shown by the real estate agent, I had a full price offer to buy the home. St. Joseph was off the hook for this duty. When actions stem from inner guidance and clear indication of God's Will, the only help needed was from the "Saint of Meant To Be." I was relieved to abstain from burying any religious statues under the ground and my invocation of St. Joseph extended no further than the charming tradition of eating zeppoles on St. Joseph's Day.