

The Ecstasies of St. Francis: The Way of Lady Poverty

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As soon as he reached the bishop's presence, he made no delay, he never hesitated for a moment, or said or listened to a word from anyone; instead, he tore off all his clothes, including even his trousers, and stood there naked before them all. He seemed to be beside himself in his fervor, and he was not ashamed to be stripped naked for love of Christ who hung naked for us all on the Cross (*MinLife*: I, 7).

Behind the brown-robed little man earnestly instructing birds, lies a life of disciplined experimentation. Because Francis of Assisi fasted and forswore any sort of ownership, even the clothes on his back, we tend to think he was heroically self-depriving. Why else would a man resolve to live on what he could beg from the patrons at his local McDonald's and give his car to a man found limping along the highway? We think of self-flagellation, of "sacrifices" to win God's favor or to compensate for our guilt. For us, self-denial is grim business, a way to earn chips in a cheerless present that can be cashed out in some ghostly future erected by faith. We think you have to have a blind and naïve conviction devoid of evidence to live in the world of space and time as though *it* were the phantom and life after death the incontrovertible reality. When we think this way, we construct a Francis who might have lived in *our* world. Our assumptions about life, death, and religious conviction weave a veil that hides the radically different universe Francis actually inhabited and prevents us from knowing who he was.

Every mystic lives in a radically different world than the one we take for granted. Francis saw the same sorts of objects and events we see. He just organized them differently. Or -- more accurately said -- he *discovered* the world to have a different organization and to require a different sort of response than the world inhabited by the rest of us. His bodily and mental experimentation altered his consciousness so that the world of everyday dissolved into a sacred universe: God's world, the kingdom of heaven, the land- and mindscape revealed by Jesus. No little calculation and learning from experience went into his daily spiritual exercises. Francis was a savvy, determined, and one-pointed man: not unlike his

father, the textile trader. Both of them improvised daring moves, studied the play of their competitors, learned from their mistakes, and capitalized on their profits. It takes as tough a mind to be a mystic as it does to make a fortune in the business world. Pietro di Barnardone and his son Francesco approached life in a similar manner, though they lived in disparate universes.

Father and Son

As the shaman drums, dances, or drugs his way into a trance that opens his eyes to an alternate world, as real in its own way as a Friday night rush hour, so Francis' daily practices maintained a sacred and alternate cosmos in which things looked and felt different than they do to us. Sometimes he did dance, and he sang a great deal. But unlike the shaman, he did not employ these activities as "techniques of ecstasy," devices to move him out of the everyday world into the sacred cosmos. In Francis' case, he sang and danced because he was already there, filled with enthusiasm and joy as he looked about and saw that the world and everything in it represented an outpouring of divine generosity. It was thrilling to be part of it all -- brother to the birds, the streams, the sun and sky, the beggars and lepers.

His father was proud to have made himself into a "major citizen," one of the *maiores* in the town of Assisi, by dint of his cleverness and hard work. He had set his son up to rise still further, to become a knight and therefore a "gentleman" if he so chose. Francis went the other way. He aspired to be a "minor citizen," like the poor, God's humblest children, and insisted that he and his disciples be known as Friars Minor, *fratres minores*.

Francis' primary "technique of ecstasy" was his practice of poverty. On the one hand it amounted to a systematic reversal of everything his father stood for; and since his father was a remarkably successful merchant, Francis' inversion constituted a repudiation of the profane world in precisely that sector in which it was most successful. The foundations of modern capitalism were being laid very effectively by Pietro di Bernardone and his cohorts; [1] feudalism was failing; and the nobility was beginning a decline which would become evident in the next two centuries. Francis seized upon the central premise of capitalism, acquisition and financial leverage, and turned it inside out. He became a dedicated spendthrift. Everything that fell into his hands by humble labor, begging, or the spontaneous generosity of his admirers he gave away at his earliest opportunity. His competitors were not the upwardly mobile but society's outcasts and downtrodden. If he found a beggar whose clothes were more worn out and patched than his own, he offered an exchange. He traded downward as resolutely as his father traded upward.

For Francis, no dependable security was to be found in clothing, shelter, money in the bank, or the praise of his contemporaries. These were the things that might have kept him in the kingdom of this world and shut off his access to the kingdom of heaven. He strove to depend without reserve on the providence of a God who clothes the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air more gloriously than Solomon. Free-spending poverty was his spiritual practice, his technique of ecstasy. Every move in the strategy of poverty removed another stone from the foundation of the profane world and firmed up the spiritual undergirding of the sacred cosmos.

Although he looked to the gospel stories of Jesus for his model in the practice of poverty, he had to undergo an intensive learning process to determine which acts could be most effective in changing his consciousness or (what amounts to the same thing) transforming the world, rearranging the profane into the sacred. He had to learn that each moment presents its own opportunity, that nothing can be planned in advance, that moment-to-moment living is the only reliable teacher. Indeed, the God who clothes the lilies and the birds is present in each moment, giving Francis the circumstances and the challenge wherein the spiritual response of poverty is to be discovered. Every moment is potentially an opportunity for an exchange with God. God speaks in providing the circumstances, Francis responds by giving something away. A divine/human dialogue occurs in every moment of time. To be conscious of this and to act upon it is to abolish profane time and open up the sacred timelessness of God's world.

His earliest biographers like to imply that Francis' life reiterated some of the main themes and even the miracles of Jesus' life, but it would be more accurate to say that he was an original. He did not so much imitate the things Jesus did as discover for himself through relentless experimentation how the cosmos of Jesus could be established and lived in thirteenth century Italy.

The Bishop's Cloak

Francis' great reversal of values began with almost liturgical drama when he spurned his father in the presence of the bishop. A "miracle" had occurred: the wooden Christ on a crucifix had ordered him to "Repair my church." Promptly selling a quantity of cloth and a horse belonging to his father, he offered the money to the pastor of that church. The pastor refused, the father sued, and Francis went into hiding. After the money was recovered, Pietro brought his son before the bishop "to renounce all his claims and return everything he had." Francis promptly stripped off the clothes he was wearing, gave them to his father, and in his nakedness declared:

"Until now I have called you my father, but from now on I can say without reserve, 'Our Father who art in heaven.' He is all my wealth and I place my confidence in him." When the bishop heard this, he was amazed at his passionate fervor. He jumped to his feet and took Francis into his embrace, covering him with the cloak he was wearing, like the good man that he was (*MajLife*: II, 4).[2]

There are variants of this story in the several early biographies, but the message clearly remains that Francis rejected the civil authorities under which his father had sued him in favor of churchly authority in the person of the bishop. The fatherhood of God was decisively to be mediated by the church. But the church, too, became a problematic father (or mother) for the young man who was determined to live a personal dialogue with God through choosing to be poor. There is a religio-political tension in the imagery of the scene. The bishop is awed by Francis' fervor, that radical passion that apparently cares nothing for what people may think, and that burns his bridges behind him. He has given up all material and profane security. His stripping off of his clothes might have been a perfect religious act -- except for his nakedness. Standing there exposed, he is also an embarrassment. His passionate fervor has something risqué about it, and the bishop hastens to hide Francis' nakedness behind his ecclesiastical cloak.

This is only the first and by no means the last time Francis came close to embarrassing the church. He and his followers too closely resembled other mystic bands who practiced a form of poverty but had been declared heretics, the Cathars and Waldensians. The heretics made the church their enemy, opposed the priesthood, and denied the efficacy of the sacraments when they were administered by lax or sinful priests. Francis, despite his grubby appearance and rebellious attitude, however, had no intention of repudiating the church but only of reforming it. He was critical of its wealth, its compromise with the kingdom of this world, and particularly of the religious orders whose monasteries had become landholders, even to the point of commanding small armies of knights.[3] He also spurned learning and the intricacies of theological argument. But he spoke so eloquently of his love of God and "holy poverty" that crowds wept and people from all walks of life gave away their possessions so as to wander dusty mountain roads with growling stomachs and happy hearts.

In the space of the two decades that elapsed between his repudiation of his father and his death, he won tens of thousands of followers and formulated an emotional Christianity that appealed to the townspeople and the uneducated dregs of society which the official church, with its tilt toward the nobility had overlooked. In retrospect, we can see that he changed the direction of Western Christianity while inspiring legends that are still being told today.

By the time of his death at the age of forty-five, however, it looked as though the spirit of his rebellion had been entirely absorbed and corrupted by the church he had tried to serve. His most influential followers were building grand cathedrals and assuming professorships at the Universities of Oxford and Paris, while those who attempted to continue a life of absolute poverty were reviled as fanatics and suspected of heresy. The little towns of North Italy fought over his disease-ridden body like vultures, determined to secure fame and wealth by displaying his relics once he was dead. "By the next century, Franciscans were attracting donations from the wealthy, and knights and ladies were having themselves buried in Franciscan habits" (Tuchman, 1978: 31).

Very likely the reason Francis of Assisi is known today as a saint rather than a heretic is the relationship he cultivated with Pope Innocent III who gave verbal (non-written) approval for the foundation of a religious order designed to perpetuate the way of life Francis and his eleven earliest followers were living. Although the fact of this approval was never doubted, the nature of what was approved became the center of a controversy in the last years of Francis' life leading to an official promulgation of the Franciscan Rule of Life which differs substantially from the ideals of the earliest band of friars. The entire Franciscan movement had found itself covered by the bishop's cloak. In the two decades that elapsed between Francis' personal conversion to a life of absolute poverty and the establishment of his religious order, a potentially disruptive movement of enormous proportions was tamed and assimilated to social and ecclesiastical norms that were a horror to its charismatic founder.

We may therefore view with some suspicion the rapid canonization process whereby Francis was declared a saint of the Catholic church only two years after his death. The church admitted no contradiction between beatifying the man and revising his doctrines. Instead it hurried to craft an official version of his life, a tamed and watered-down account, designed to manage the lives of his far flung disciples, the vast majority of whom had never

met him. Just as the town of Assisi gained possession of his bones and built a cathedral over them, the authorities in Rome secured possession of his life-story by commissioning a talented rhetorician, Thomas of Celano, a learned friar who was never a companion of Francis to write his official biography.

Celano finally wrote three "Lives" of St. Francis, or "legends" (*legendae*), that is writings that were meant to be read aloud for the public to hear (from *legere*, Latin, "to read"). Each was more filled with miracles than the last. Within the two decades after Francis' death when Celano was writing his biographies, three other "legends" appeared. Two of them were apparently written by Francis' close associates (*Legend of the Three Companions* and *Legend of Perugia*). The third (*Holy Intercourse of Francis and His Lady Poverty*), which was written before *ICelano*, is a religious allegory by an unknown Franciscan.

A quarter of a century after the death of Francis, even the Franciscans were fighting over his identity, each faction employing its favorite biography to make its points. Therefore, in 1260, at a "General Chapter," that is a comprehensive meeting of the order to determine its goals and objectives, its Minister General, St. Bonaventure, an influential theologian of mysticism, was asked to write an "official biography," what has become known as his *Major Life* (*Legenda maior*), completed in 1263. Borrowing from all the biographies then known, he compiled a saint's life in which Francis' formulaic greeting was, "May the Lord give you his peace" (*MajLife*: III, 2); and he ordered his followers to, "Go and proclaim peace to men and preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (*MajLife*: III, 7). If Francis was primarily a man of peace, his Franciscans could hardly claim to be following him if they continued to foment discord. And to ensure that this be the case -- the final cloak -- Franciscans were ordered to burn all earlier biographies, which they apparently did. We have copies of them today only because some non-Franciscan monasteries had no obligation to destroy them.

With the hindsight of the twenty-first century, we can see that the stories of Francis must have been growing and becoming progressively more fantastic like folklore. The image of Francis people remembered was bound to become less and less distinct, as more and more was claimed about him. Bonaventure's effort preserved a nucleus of anecdotes deemed officially acceptable and gave a definite form to the Francis of faith -- though it is hardly what we would call a dependable biography in any modern sense. No less than Celano or Francis' closest companions, Bonaventure has larded every anecdote with biblical phrases designed to impress us with the orthodoxy and divine guidance that transformed the impractical, fun-loving, and dreamy adolescent Francesco di Bernardone into St. Francis of Assisi. Ultimately there is no getting behind the legends to the "real, historical Francis." The only Francis we have is the charismatic and legendary figure that inspired the anecdotes, the Francis who lives on in the hearts and minds of those who have been gripped by his story.

Brother Jacoba

Despite all efforts in the direction of orthodoxy, a number of curious anecdotes have survived. One of the most intriguing of these concerns a noble widow from Rome, Lady Jacoba di Settesoli. No mention is made of her before Francis is on his deathbed, when he requests a letter be written. He wants to see her one last time, and he wants her to bring gray

shroud cloth and some of the honey-almond confection he loves. No sooner is the letter written, than there is a knock at the gate, and Jacoba is there with the cloth and the sweet. Immediately there is a problem: should this woman be allowed inside the cloister to see the dying saint? Francis brushes the issue aside. This woman is an exception to the rule. He calls her "Brother Jacoba" (*Perugia*: 101; *Mirror*: 112).

The story may have been preserved as "evidence" of a minor miracle, the fact that Jacoba appears with the desired objects as soon as Francis has his wishes written down. But it is not at all clear from the context how this "miracle" has anything to do with sainthood. We fail even to learn what possessed the pious lady to make the several-day trip precisely at that time. Had she been given a dream or vision, or merely an inspired hunch? From our present-day perspective we can appreciate the extraordinary nature of Lady Jacoba's arrival without having to think it was miraculous. It is similar to our infrequent but familiar experience of finding ourselves thinking about someone just as that very person rings us up. Such events are most likely to happen when there is a powerful emotional connection between the two individuals. They are likely to be lovers, parent and child, or something of the kind. The mystical literature is full of such events between guru and disciple;^[4] and the biographers of Edgar Cayce report many instances when the "sleeping prophet" would perform one of his entranced cure-readings on a individual who -- unbeknownst to Cayce -- had just mailed a request for such a seance.^[5]

The evidence seems unmistakable that Jacoba's relationship with Francis is long-standing and deep, undoubtedly bearing an erotic cast which both *Perugia* and *Mirror* seem to confirm in describing her as a "Mary Magdalen," "in that she had received the gift of tears and fervor from God." Francis wants to see her one last time and to be buried in her shroud. Furthermore, her status as "Brother Jacoba" implies that she has long enjoyed an exception to the general rule of cloister. Another tradition goes so far as to say Francis was able to recognize only two women by their faces -- Clare and Jacoba -- for he was in the habit of lowering his eyes when obliged to speak to women (Erickson, 1970: 84f).

Thomas of Celano, in his third "Life," gives an extended account of this final meeting between Francis and Jacoba (*3Celano*: 37-39). She was about to send her retinue away so as to stay with Francis until the end, but he tells her he will die on Saturday and that she can continue her journey on Sunday. It happens as he predicted, and she is with him at the end.

She was led quietly, streaming with tears, to Francis, and his body was placed in her arms. "See," said the vicar, "he whom you loved in life you shall hold in your arms in death." She wept hot tears over his body, wept aloud, and sighed deeply; and holding him in her arms and kissing him, she loosened the veil so that she would see him unhindered. Why should we say more? She looked upon that precious body in which also a precious treasure lay hidden, ornamented as it was with five pearls (*Ibid.*, 39).

Suddenly Jacoba is no longer Mary Magdalen, the sinner who loved much. She has become the sinless one, Mary the Mother of Jesus. We are looking at a pieta. The "five pearls" ornamenting the naked body in her arms are Francis' stigmata, the wounds in his hands, feet, and side.

Francis' life of reversal begins and ends in nakedness. At the beginning, when he strips in front of the bishop, he chooses God as his only father. At the end, when his "veil" is

loosened by Jacoba and falls away, we see that God has fully and dramatically accepted Francis. He bears the crucifixion marks of the Son of God. In its monotheism, Christianity could never say that Francis was an avatar, another incarnation of the godhead; but the imagery employed by his hagiographers implies a theologically chaste divinization.

As far as we know, Francis was the first stigmatic. The psychosomatic appearance of the wounds of crucifixion is more understandable to us today, when celebrated individuals like Padre Pio and hundreds of lesser known Christians have been studied. We know that a powerful cultural image can operate in the unconscious to effect changes in the body. Although the manifestation of stigmata remains extremely rare, its occurrence is well-known and functions as a cultural suggestion which may be seized upon by any person who is adequately predisposed. Again, however, Francis was an original. In 1224 there was no precedent for such an event. It seemed to his contemporaries, and probably to Francis himself, that he had been singled out by God for a unique physical ratification of his saintly life. Everyone who knew him was aware that he had striven over two full decades to live a life of perfect poverty in imitation of Jesus. Now it was evident by divine miracle that he had succeeded in the eyes of God. He was unquestionably a second Christ.

Loosening the Veil

For us inhabitants of the twenty-first century to loosen the veil around Francis means to drop our cultural assumptions and to attempt to reconstruct for ourselves the psychology of his mystical practice. While his biographers sought to reveal his sanctity by assembling biblical texts and theological propositions, we will attend to the events depicted in the stories themselves and ask what are the psychological dynamics occurring in Francis himself when he was doing these things. We want to know what techniques he was using to transform the profane world into the sacred. How must things have looked and felt to Francis when he danced and sang and preached to the birds?

When I speak of our cultural assumptions that must be loosened and allowed to drop, I mean not only the Christian form that Western culture has had over the past two millennia, but also the Cartesian and Newtonian perspectives that cut us off from the mind of the Middle Ages. To some extent, it would be easier for us to understand Francis if he had been a Hindu, for then the exotic nature of his origins would allow us more easily to lay aside our modern Western mind-set.

Indeed, if he *had* been a Hindu, we would probably conclude that he was an avatar of Shiva, the Lord of Reversal, the god who destroys the universe to reveal a larger Reality, the Lord of Yoga, the unrespectable god who loves to be intoxicated and overturns all conventions, who goes about naked and smeared with the ashes of cremation grounds, the Lord of the Dance, the Lord of the Animals, the God of Sex who makes love to Parvati, the Lady of the Mountain, for thousands of years on end without ejaculating. For Francis used poverty to effect a grand reversal that destroyed the profane world and revealed a sacred cosmos; he loved nothing more than meditating; he was reviled as a heretic, a reprobate, and ne'er-do-well; he was naked at the beginning and the end of his story as well as several times in the middle; otherwise, he wore the most patched and flea-infested clothes he could find; he called Death his sister; he communicated with birds, mammals, fish, and insects; he sang

and danced in his intoxication with God; and all of his biographers aver that he was betrothed to, married to, or constantly making love to Lady Poverty, [6] the Lady of the Mountain, although this was a chaste form of love-making. Francis is said to have slept sitting up and meditating, reminding us of a yogi spending the night in *samadhi* (at one with the Absolute), drifting in and out of sleep without losing God-consciousness (*ICelano*: 52). But perhaps the most unexpected tradition holds that Brother Juniper responded to Brother Tendelbene's death by saying that he would like to turn the dead friar's skull into a bowl and cup for his daily use (Englebert, 1979: 99). The followers of Shiva are famous for using skulls for precisely this purpose.

If we can remember parallels such as these, we will certainly have loosened the veil of Christian piety that conceals the mystical psychology of Francis of Assisi. Because Francis' experience and behavior so much resemble those of another culture's divine model, there must be something universally human about his style of mysticism. Both the Hindu and Francis employ the same instrument in their *sadhana* (or "spiritual practice"), namely the thing that is closest to hand, their body-and-mind. It is true that Francis referred to his body as Brother Ass, and he meant that it was the source of his temptations to return to the profane world of everyday comforts. But he read his body's reactions and kept a close watch on his emotional and physiological responses to the situations, people, and events with which life presented him. Indeed, this is another meaning in Brother Jacoba's unveiling. She shows us the instrument, beatified by its extraordinary marks, by which he achieved his ecstasies -- those emotional and physiological states that made it possible for him to live in the sacred cosmos.

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1. "The textile industry was the automobile industry of the Middle Ages" (Tuchman, 1978: 39).
 2. For abbreviations, see "A Note on the Early Biographies" immediately following the Table of Contents.
 3. Norman Cantor, in his influential history of the Middle Ages, tells us that although monks were to live a life of constant prayer supported by their own labor, by 800 most monasteries were supported by the labor of serfs, and the monks themselves were almost exclusively drawn from the nobility. "By the tenth century, the black monks [Benedictines] owned a considerable part of the best farmland in Western Europe . . . [and] were required to become vassals of the king or duke and to send knights to the armies of their lords." They became scholars, bishops, popes, and advisors and administrators of kings. (Cantor, 1994: 154).
 4. The twelfth century Muslim mystic, Ibn al-'Arabi gives many such example from his life according to R.W.J. Austin (Translator and Editor), *Sufis of Andalusia: The Ruh al-quds and al-Durrat al-fakhirah of Ibn 'Arabi*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977.
 5. E.g., Thomas Sugrue, *There is a River. The Story of Edgar Cayce*. Virginia Beach: A.R.E. Press, 1994.
 6. By sheer coincidence, Shiva's consort's name, Parvati (PAR-vuh-tee), even sounds like Poverty.