

The freedom of God's children

Perfect joy and death as a sister

In these Lenten meditations, in the year in which the Church celebrates the eighth centenary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, allow ourselves to be guided by the figure of the 'poor man' on the path of conversion to the Gospel. In the first two meditations, we contemplated Francis in the tension between the greatness of his vocation and the fragility of his humanity: conversion as a path of humility and fraternity as the concrete setting in which that conversion takes place and takes shape. In the third meditation, we focused on the task of mission: the way in which Francis proclaimed the Gospel not through the power of words or the effectiveness of strategies, but through the disarming poverty of a life offered. In this fourth and final meditation, we will try to look at the ripest fruit of his experience: the freedom of God's children. Not the freedom of those who evade the risks and burdens of life, but that of those who have learnt, gradually and through many trials, that nothing – not even rejection, illness or death – can ever separate us from God's love.

1. Perfect joy

Saint Francis lived a spiritual experience of great intensity, yet one not far removed from our own humanity. He did not become a saint because he did extraordinary things, but because he learnt to let himself be guided by God within the concreteness and poverty of his existence. For this reason, the spiritual tradition has come to define him as an *alter Christus*, that is, a man who, by welcoming the Holy Spirit with openness, became like the incarnate Son of God. The conversions, healings and signs that took place during his pilgrimage in this world are nothing other than the reflection of a full and effective immersion in the grace of new life in Christ. Thomas of Celano says that, towards the end of his days, Francis was "not so much praying, as having become a [living] prayer" (Thomas of Celano, *Second Life* 95; *Franciscan Sources* 682). This does not mean that the Saint spent all his time reciting prayer formulas, but that his entire way of living had become like a continuous prayer, that is, it expressed a stable, profound, authentic relationship with God.

In his final years, however, Saint Francis' faith was put to the test by God's wisdom. The sources recount that Francis underwent a "most grievous temptation", a long and profound crisis, which affected him "inwardly and outwardly, in spirit and body" to the point that "he shunned the company of the brethren, for, overwhelmed by that torment, he could not show himself to

them with his usual serenity" (Compilation of Assisi, 63; *Franciscan Sources* 1591).

The Order of Friars Minor had grown and transformed, and Francis struggled to recognize in it the spirit that had inspired its beginnings. In the Portiuncola he felt sidelined, almost useless, even regarded as a "fool". In this dramatic and tormented time, Francis opened his heart to his friend and companion, Brother Leo. Whilst they were together at Saint Mary of the Angels, Francis voiced his pain by recounting a parable. He asked Brother Leo to list some good things that might be a source of pride for him and for the Church: numerous vocations of holy friars, great success in preaching, healings, miracles, the esteem of others. Then he told him to write: "in all these things there is no true joy". His companion, at this point, asks in bewilderment: but then, "what is true joy?". Francis replied thus:

"If, when we shall arrive at Saint Mary of the Angels from Perugia, all drenched with rain and trembling with cold, all covered with mud and exhausted from hunger; if, when we knock at the convent-gate, the porter should come angrily and ask us who we are; if, after we have told him, 'We are two of the brethren', he should answer angrily, 'What you say is not the truth; ye are but two imposters going about to deceive the world, and take away the alms of the poor; begone I say'; if then he refuse to open to us, and leave us outside, exposed to the snow and rain, suffering from cold and hunger till nightfall – then, if we accept such injustice, such cruelty and such contempt with patience, without being ruffled and without murmuring, believing with humility and charity that the porter really knows us, and that it is God who makes him to speak thus against us, write down, O Brother Leo, that this is perfect joy" (On True and Perfect Joy; *Franciscan Sources* 278).

The story has a simple yet skilful structure. After listing what does not constitute true joy, it arrives at the key point: authentic joy is manifested when rejection, humiliation and misunderstanding cannot rob us of our peace.

True joy does not coincide with the feeling we experience when things are going well and our life receives recognition and consolation, but in the way in which we react in adverse circumstances, when we are rejected and excluded. Naturally, it does not mean becoming insensitive to pain. Francis does not seek a numb heart, but discovers that he can have a free heart even in the midst of the greatest suffering. Happiness is not about shielding oneself from reality, but learning to embrace it even when it hurts, without being overwhelmed by it. It is there that the Christian life becomes concrete and we learn to cherish a joy that does not depend on how well things go, but on how we choose to live them. The Apostle James also says:

"Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4).

The answer that Francis indicates is not to flee from evil, nor to deny it, nor to retaliate in kind. It is something deeper: to absorb it, without letting it be passed on from us to others. To refuse to become what has wounded us. It is a demanding path, but a liberating one. For when we receive evil, it always touches something alive within us. And it is precisely there, in that vulnerable spot, that perfect joy can be born: not as the absence of wounds, but as the freedom not to let them define us. It is a freedom that does not erase the pain, but prevents it from having the last word.

2. The fullness of life

This capacity to find joy even in the midst of tribulations is not a spiritual goal reserved for a privileged few who have received the gift of a special intimacy with God. In the Gospel, Jesus shows that this way of life – free even in the face of hatred and persecution – is the fulfilled form of the new life in his name. This is why, at the beginning of his public ministry, he went up a mountain and proclaimed the Beatitudes. Not a law, but a promise. Not a programme of moral perfection, but the revelation of a happiness already at work at the heart of reality.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5: 3-12).

These words, which we know almost by heart, are the heart of the Gospel, for they definitively dispel the illusion that happiness depends on the goals and successes we may achieve in life – or perhaps even pursue. Jesus points to the most uncomfortable and difficult situations in which we may find ourselves and affirms that it is precisely there that a mysterious fullness of life is hidden. The Beatitudes do not invite us to flee from reality nor to postpone happiness to a distant future. They ask us to dwell more deeply on what we are experiencing, even when it appears fragile and unfulfilled. They proclaim that the path to a full life passes through our concrete experience, through who we are and what we are going through. It is not up to us to build or achieve happiness: beatitude is a promise already placed within our lives, as a gift from the Father. It is a matter of learning how to recognize it and welcome it.

There is, however, a crucial point to emphasize. The Beatitudes do not speak merely of a future in which we shall be rewarded by God: they tell us that this life, just as it is, is already the place where we can savour the fullness of life. And this becomes possible because those words spring from a specific gaze: that of Jesus, who reveals to us who we are in God's eyes. Jesus observes men and women marked by fatigue, poverty, pain and striving. And it is precisely upon them that He pronounces a word of blessing. It is as if He were saying: in who you are and in what you are striving to live, there is already a fullness destined to ripen and be fulfilled.

The Beatitudes do not chart a heroic path, but enable us to offer a humble acceptance of what we are called to live, even when it involves hardship, loneliness and persecution. They affirm that reality, just as it is, can become a place of happiness. This means that life should not be postponed or idealized, but embraced in its tragic and sublime reality. Evangelical joy does not eliminate wounds, but transcends and transforms them, opening us up to the greatest love, the love that forgives. It is precisely in this acceptance of reality that a new freedom opens up, one that is no longer dependent on external conditions.

This is the heart of the Beatitudes. And it is what Francis perceived at the end of his human and Christian experience, when he revealed to Brother Leo, through a parable, the place where authentic joy dwells.

3. The consequences of love

In the history of Christian spirituality, the mystical phenomena in which the mystery of Christ's suffering is reflected in the body of the believer have often been misunderstood, sometimes feared, at other times reduced to events to be classified as inexplicable wonders. The most subtle risk is to allow ourselves to be led by them towards a distorted image of God: as if He needed our pain to be satisfied or glorified, as if something were still lacking in Christ's sacrifice, as if we were still living within an ancient logic of debt and expiation.

We know that this is not the case. God needs nothing from us, other than that we welcome the gift of Christ's sacrifice and, through its gradual assimilation, learn to live love in its fullness. When God touches a person deeply, He is not adding pain, but transforming and transfiguring what is already present in their life, making it a sign and a consequence of love.

With this in mind we can approach the event of Francis's stigmata, which took place on Mount La Verna between the summer and autumn of 1224, two years before his death, in the period between the Feast of the Assumption and that of Saint Michael. Sources recount that, at the end of a Lent spent in honour of the Archangel, Francis had a vision of a crucified Seraphim and that, from that encounter, his body was marked by the nails in his hands and feet and by the wound in his side (cf. Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, 94–95; *Franciscan Sources* 485–486). But to understand what happened at La Verna, one must consider the

condition in which Francis arrived there. The wounds were already present within him, even before they became visible. His body was frail, his eyes afflicted by an illness that was leading him towards blindness. His soul was gripped by the “great temptation”: the Order was growing beyond measure, assuming forms he no longer recognized, and the friars – whom he had founded – were drifting away from his evangelical radicalism. He felt sidelined, perceived as a burden. He climbed the mountain not as a victor, but as a wounded man.

It is precisely here that the mystical experience shows its truest meaning. God does not intervene by adding new lacerations, but by transforming those that already exist in life. Francis’ sufferings – the failure of his plans, the misunderstanding of his brethren, the solitude of one who has given himself without reserve – cease to be a burden held within and become a locus of relationship. What seemed to separate him from others is transformed into what unites him to Christ and, consequently, reconciles him with his brothers. The words that the Apostle Paul writes at the end of the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans aptly express this crucial passage in the life of Saint Francis:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35, 38-39).

The stigmata are not a miracle to be observed from a distance, nor a privilege reserved for a select few. They are the visible sign of an inner transformation: the point at which the wounds do not close in hardness, but open up to relationship. This is the gift of La Verna: man’s defeats – failures, illnesses, relational disappointments – can become places where our humanity is transformed. Pain does not disappear, but it no longer has the final say. Francis descends from La Verna with a marked body and a free heart: capable of looking upon his brothers with patience, of loving them precisely within their limitations. He has passed from death to life.

This story, still told eight hundred years later, is good news because it concerns every one of us. The sorrows of life leave marks on us that we do not always understand and that we often struggle to accept. They are wounds that remain open to two possibilities: they can shut us up in resentment or flight, or become spaces for growth and freedom.

To the extent to which we are able to embrace our wounds, we discover that they can be transfigured by the Spirit of Christ to take on a renewed symbolic value. They remain wounds, but they become a sign of a deeper belonging, attesting to our having become members of the body of Christ. Then Paul’s

words become comprehensible and meaningful for us too: “Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Galatians 6:17). The suffering does not disappear, but it no longer has the power to close us up. Deep in our hearts we discover a peace that nothing and no one can take away from us.

4. Sister death

There is an ancient saying in the Indian tradition that compares human life to four seasons: the spring for learning, the summer for teaching, the autumn for retreating to the forest and meditating, and winter for learning how to beg. Francis experienced them all. He learned during his restless youth in Assisi, he taught during the years of preaching and founding the Order, he withdrew into the solitude of La Verna and his hermitages. But it is in the winter of life, in the months preceding death, that he performs the most difficult act: he learns to beg. Not for bread – he had always known how to ask for that. He learns to beg for consolation, closeness, tenderness. He learns to receive.

In his last months, Francis allowed himself to be taken in at the bishop of Assisi’s palace. It is a striking detail. That man who had made poverty the hallmark of his life, who had stripped himself of everything before his father and the bishop, now accepts being cared for in a sheltered place. It is not a contradiction. It is the consistency of one who has learnt that receiving, too, is an act of humility. The poverty of his early days gives way to something more authentic: the poverty of one who knows he needs others both to live and to die.

In the abode where he was staying, Francis asked the friars to sing the praises of God to ease his pain. He had them sing even at night. And when Brother Elias pointed out to him that such joy might surprise those who knew he was near death, Francis replied:

“Brother, let me rejoice in the Lord and in His Praises amidst my sufferings, for, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, I am so closely united to my Lord that, through His mercy, I may well rejoice in the Most High!” (Compilation of Assisi 99: *Franciscan Sources* 1637).

When the doctor then told him that death was imminent, he wanted to know for certain: “Tell me the truth, what do you foresee? Do not be afraid, for, by God’s grace, I am no coward who fears death” (Compilation of Assisi 100; FF 1638). To the news he replied with a disarming word: “Welcome, my sister Death!” That is precisely how he had called death, when he added the final stanza to his Canticle of the Creatures:

“Praised be you, my Lord, / through our Sister Bodily Death, / from whom no living being can escape” (Canticle of the Creatures 27-29; *Franciscan Sources* 263).

That word – sister – is not a consolatory metaphor. It is the fruit of a long journey of reconciliation. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, the devil keeps us enslaved all our lives through the fear of death (cf. Hebrews 2:15). That is why we all try to escape it and flee from it in every way, for as long as we are able to do so.

But when Christ's love succeeds in shaping a new life within us, that fear slowly melts away, and death changes its face, becoming the final and definitive opportunity for conversion: the moment when we let go of everything that still holds us back and surrender ourselves, without reservation, to the just and merciful gaze of the Father.

Aware that the end was near, Francis then wished to leave the bishop's palace and be taken to the Portiuncula, the place dearest to him in the world. Sources tell us that among his final wishes was also that of receiving a visit from Donna Jacopa dei Settesogli, the Roman friend who had supported him with faithful affection for years. For this reason, he wrote her a note, begging her to come and see him and to bring him those little sweets that she knew how to make and which he loved so much. It is the gesture of a man who still desires, for the last time, a friendly face and a little kindness.

Donna Jacopa arrived even before the letter was sent, inspired by God: "Thus she entered the blessed Francis's presence, shedding many tears before him" (Compilation of Assisi 8; *Franciscan Sources* 1548). In that scene – a sick man, a friend in tears, the friars gathered round, the singing of Lauds in the night – the final act of Francis's evangelical poverty is fulfilled. Not the poverty of the early days, marked by gestures of radical departure, but the most difficult kind: that of one who accepts being seen in one's own fragility, who has nothing left to prove and nothing to defend, who knows they need others for that passage which, in the end, must be faced alone. Thus Francis dies, having learnt the utmost lesson: that receiving is the purest form of giving, and that allowing oneself to be loved until the very end is the greatest of freedoms.

5. Naked on the bare ground

The official biographies have chosen to narrate Francis's death differently. Anything that implied a man in need is toned down or left in the background. What emerges above all in them is the figure of the saint, the Christian hero, the exemplary witness to evangelical perfection. Bonaventure presents Francis as the one who "wanted to pay his debt to death" (*Legenda Minor* 7,3; *Franciscan Sources* 1386), with the awareness of a knight going forth to meet his adversary. His entire existence appears as an upward journey towards fulfilment, and death as its worthy culmination.

And yet, precisely within this lofty and luminous narrative, the same sources preserve a detail that cannot be erased, for it is too true.

“Worn out as he was by that grievous sickness which was the end of all his sufferings, he bade that he should be laid naked on the bare ground, that in that last hour wherein the enemy could yet rage against him he might wrestle naked with his naked foe” (Thomas of Celano, *Second Life* 214; *Franciscan Sources* 804).

Naked on the bare ground: this is neither an ascetic image nor a symbolic challenge to death, but the logical fulfilment of an entire life. Renunciation had been the common thread running through his entire journey: years earlier, in the square in Assisi, before his father Pietro di Bernardone and Bishop Guido, Francis had divested himself of all his clothes, giving everything back and choosing no longer to base his identity on possessions, a role or a name. That day he had donned the habit as one might don freedom. Now, at the end of his pilgrimage, even that last garment is no longer needed. Not because it is despised, but because it is no longer necessary. Francis has finished his journey and has finally been reconciled with his own history, with what he has lived through and even with what he failed to accomplish. He has nothing left to fear and nothing to be ashamed of: every page of his life has been illuminated by grace. He has fought the good fight of faith: he has become a true son of God.

In Scripture, nakedness is not a marginal detail, but contains the secret of the relationship between man and God. “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25): in the beginning, nakedness is transparency; indeed, it is the condition of those who live undefended because they receive everything as a gift. It is the serpent who introduces suspicion, insinuating that life must be possessed and protected. From that moment on, nakedness becomes shame, death becomes terror, and the body a place of tension. Yet God does not abandon man in this fear: the entire biblical story tells of a God who continues to seek man to restore confidence to him. Christ brings this story to fulfilment on the cross, naked, exposed, whilst continuing to bless. It is there that God reaches man at the most fragile point of his existence and definitively extinguishes suspicion regarding life and death. The antidote to fear is not a stronger defence, but the opposite: to stop defending oneself, to open one’s arms and learn to receive.

Francis slowly assimilated this secret, practising throughout his life to return to his own creaturely nakedness. Every divestment was an act of trust, every renunciation a step towards a more profound freedom. But the final nakedness of the Portiuncula is not merely the culmination of an ascetic journey: it is a man’s reconciliation with himself. Throughout his life, Francis had taken on many identities – the merchant’s son, the ambitious young man, the would-be knight, the convert, the founder, the preacher, the sick man, even the wounded and misunderstood man – and now, lying on the ground, all this melts away. Only the essential remains: a creature among other creatures, at peace before his Creator, in need of everything and, precisely for this reason, ready to receive everything with gratitude.

This is why the Church recognizes him as a saint. Not primarily for what he did, but for what he was able to become. Francis preserved his humanity to the very end, without hiding it or hardening it. He learnt to accept his own frailty, to live as a son and as a brother, no longer ashamed of his own smallness. And it was precisely in this accepted smallness that he found the greatest freedom: that of placing himself at the service of the Church and the world with generosity, without measure, without calculation and without defences.

Conclusion

The path of Francis of Assisi is not an exception reserved for the few, but the full realization of what the Gospel promises to every baptized person: a life of freedom, capable of loving to the very end and of enduring suffering without being overcome by it. It is a real, accessible grace that enables us to recognize in every reality – even in death – the face of a Father who never abandons us.

Faced with this witness, our task as pastors is as important as it is delicate. We cannot adapt the Gospel to our fears, reducing it to a reassuring proposition or a set of religious practices that preserve its outward appearance but strip it of its true spiritual power. To offer a cheap form of Christianity, one that is easier but less demanding, means depriving men and women of what they truly need: a path capable of leading our steps into eternal life.

The Gospel does not invite us to live less fully, nor to flee from the burden and toil of reality. Rather, it empowers us to desire life with the greatest possible intensity, humbly embracing the cross and our daily bread. The Gospel offers no shortcuts, but enables us to embark on a journey of purification and conversion that leads to the freedom of the Children of God. It is the responsibility of the Church's pastors to safeguard this truth without watering it down, pointing out paths that open the doors to full maturity in Christ.

In this year in which we contemplate Francis, let us allow ourselves to be challenged by his Gospel witness. It is not a matter of imitating his actions, but of allowing ourselves to be stirred by the desire that guided every step of his life: to know Christ, "the power of His resurrection, and share His sufferings, becoming like him in His death, that if possible [we] may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11).

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, grant us wretched ones, for your love's sake, to do what we know you will, and always to will what pleases you, so that, purified within, enlightened within and set ablaze by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we may follow in the footsteps of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the help of your grace alone may we come to you, O Most High, who in the perfect Trinity and in simple Unity live and reign and are glorified, almighty God for ever and ever. Amen.

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