



Tau Maria Franciscan Formation Meditations
Brother Francis
Edited by Lawrence Cunningham

M Meditation – Life of St. Francis

INTRODUCTION:

... Yet it was in his search for God that Francis was so distinctively a child of his own time. The Middle Ages put a high premium on sanctity, and Francis sought that sanctity with unswerving devotion. The early legends of his life (such as the *Fiortetti*) had no other intention than to exalt him as a searcher for complete identification with the person of Christ. Even the polemical slant of the legends (to bolster fidelity to the original ideals of the saint) were written to show that men should follow the example of man close to God. If Francis spoke to animals, it was because he was in tune with all of God's creation. If Francis lived with lepers it was because he had the supernatural strength to do it. If men were converted or cried tears of repentance or sold their goods and gave it to the poor—it was because Francis was a saint.

The point is that his medieval chroniclers and followers saw him in that light. He had no other claim on their allegiance: he was not a graceful writer or spellbinding preacher or an artist. He was a poor, ragged man who led the life of a hobo. But he was a saint.

The moot point is, of course, whether that same enthusiasm that his contemporaries had for the man can carry over today. Saints seem to be less marketable in our own time than in the past. This is especially true of saints who have had visions, had mystical experiences, preach fidelity to an organized religion, and generally behaved in a nonmodern way.

One possibility for the apologist of Francis (and I am an unabashed apologist for him) is to sanitize his image for modern man by demythologizing all of the manifestations of the medieval. This is not only a difficult task but also a dangerous one. It would mean at the offset chucking out all the art, legend, and fact concerning the man. It would mean hiding a good portion of what appears in these pages. Ultimately, it would mean to falsify.

A less draconian approach to a contemporary understanding of Francis would be to understand Francis in terms of his own background, recognizing those elements in his life that are peculiar to his own culture, and then asking what other elements escape the medieval moment so as to speak to our own time. The merit of such an approach is that one can retain the charm of the legendary Francis without losing the genuine claim that he can make of our time.

What is the source of Francis' importance for our time? Off-hand, I would say that it is to be found in his seriousness. This may appear to be paradoxical at first glance, since he seems to be such a lighthearted, whimsical, and essentially gentle person. But this only tells part of the story. There is another side of Francis that is totally dedicated, unbending, searching for the ultimate meaning of love and service, a God-haunted man who gave up all to obtain all. This seriousness changed him from the wealthy man of a comfortable Umbrian home to the blind, ragged figure of Mount Alverna.



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It was his seriousness about the reality and truth of what he read in the Gospel that turned his life into what it was. When Francis worked with his hands, sheltered outcasts, kissed a leper, or became a poor wanderer, it was because he had a model for his behavior. Poverty for him was not an affectation; nor a protest. It was an imitation of the One who shed the glory of heaven for the slavery of human experience.

My thesis then would be that the contemporary relevance of Francis is to be found precisely in this utter seriousness. This seriousness, in turn, speaks to men of our time in slightly different ways. It says one thing to those who come to Francis with some commitment to Christianity and something else to those who do not.

To men in the church, the figure of Saint Francis is an embarrassing one. He keeps the Christian a bit off guard, because his life is a totally serious attempt to answer the question that the Gospel itself asks: What do you think of Christ? The person of Saint Francis, in all its manifold manifestations, does not permit a facile answer to that question. Francis is, in the deepest biblical sense of the word, a *reproach* to those who would like to make Christianity over by restructuring either their lives or their institutions in a peripheral or tangential manner. The life of Francis compels those who would rearrange rubrics, reshuffle administrative bodies, or form committees to ask whether that type of reform will move men to kiss the outcasts of today, to confront poverty in an open and loving way, to bless peace and tame the wolf of war and strife.

No Christian can read the *Fioretti* and evade the question of whether perfect joy is to be found in the cross, just as no Christian can read Jorgensen's account of the stigmata of the saint and avoid the "scandal" of the cross. No Christian, in short, can ask for the meek Francis without asking about the suffering one; for both sides of this one man are reflections of the One whom he hoped to imitate. Someone once wrote that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it simply has not been tried. Francis tried Christ and was not disappointed. That is the whole point of his life.

If Saint Francis can serve as a "reproach" to the Christian, he can serve as a challenge to the non-Christian and to the unbeliever. For the life of Saint Francis raises an interesting question. It is a question that is not totally disengaged from the question of the credibility of the truth claims of Christianity, but, at the same time, it is one that can be raised somewhat independently of them. Saint Francis led a life that had many attractive qualities—qualities that are much envied today.

He was a man profoundly concerned with peace among men; he was passionately dedicated to the fraternity of the rich and the poor; he was totally compassionate to the suffering and dispossessed of this earth; he was profoundly reverential toward the beauty of the earth. He was a man who risked all for love. All of these facets of his life find familiar resonance in the strivings of the sensitive persons today.

...In a very real sense, to look back to medieval Umbria is to see ourselves in our aspirations and our strivings. It is worth a look.