Saint Francis and the Embrace of the Leper: A Paradigm of Welcoming the Other in Our Midst

In setting forth certain virtues that conform us to Christ, the 20th century German theologian, Romano Guardini, challenges our perception of virtue. Beyond the conventional virtues of justice, courage, kindness and courtesy, he offers the surprising virtue of ‘disinterestedness’. Acknowledging its novelty, Guardini offers an apology for its place among the virtues.

In exalting disinterestedness, Guardini is not dismissive of the value of interests in the pursuit of excellence. He admits that the man who is “ruled by his interests” undoubtedly achieves many things. He is a model of success. In submitting all to the goal that he sets for himself, he is single-minded in his pursuits. In this he is an image of modern man, with his goal-directed attitude, his consciousness to get ahead, and ability to promote himself.

But Guardini cautions that the man who is ruled by his interests must sacrifice much of what is real and human in life in order to succeed. He writes:

“In his associations with others, such a man does not turn toward another person with simplicity and sincerity, but he always has ulterior motives. He wishes to make an impression, to be envied, to gain an advantage, or to get ahead. He praises in order to be praised. He renders a service in order to be able to exact one in return. Therefore he does not really see the other as a person; instead, he sees wealth or social position, and then there is always rivalry.”

Such a man does not really engage with the other. There is no sharing of life, no giving or receiving. The relationship is superficial, characterised by utility and advantage.

Guardini contrasts this way of contempt for others with those relationships “which rest upon a candid and sincere meeting of persons.” According to Guardini, the ability to truly engage another person is premised on disinterestedness – dependent on an environment in which personal interests give way to the other. As he writes:

“We must see the other as he is, deal simply with him, and live with him. We must adapt ourselves to the situation and its demands, whether it be a conversation, collaboration, joyfulness, or the enduring of misfortune, danger, or sorrow.”

In this model of simply ‘dealing’ with others, I suggest that the figure of St. Francis looms large. It is the premise of his welcoming the other, whoever that might be. But as the life of St. Francis shows, he came to this realisation only by way of personal struggle and grace.

In this context, the life of St. Francis might be viewed as a movement from self-interest to disinterestedness. As a young man he is portrayed as frivolous, indulgent, superficial – raised, in the words of Celano, “in accordance with the vanity of the age.” He is portrayed as one “maliciously advancing beyond all of his peers in vanities”, and proving himself “a more

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1 Romano Guardini, *Learning the Virtues that lead you to God* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1998), 77-78.
2 Ibid., 78.
excessive inciter of evil and a zealous imitator of foolishness”⁴ – a man of self-interest. Francis himself simply referred to this state as one being “in sin”.

Through his conversion he becomes less self-interested. He is attentive to the other. In a particular way, Francis’ encounter with the leper on the road contains in itself this movement from self-interest to disinterestedness. In his Testament Francis describes it like this: “for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them.”⁵ The bitterness Francis felt at the sight of lepers extended even to the sight of their dwellings some miles off, prompting him to “cover his nose with his hands.”⁶

However, that decisive moment when confronted by the leper on the road, instead of turning away in fright, as was his custom, Francis was moved, interiorly impelled, to engage him. And not merely to acknowledge him, but to embrace him and kiss him. In the words of Arnaldo Fortini:

“And suddenly, as he kissed the lacerated flesh of the creature who was the most abject, the most hated, the most scorned, of all human beings, he was flooded with a wave of emotion, one that shut out everything around him, one that he would remember even on his death bed.”⁷

From that moment, the direction of Francis’ life changed. Instead of avoiding lepers, he actively sought them out. Several days after his encounter with the leper on the road, his biographers tell us that he visited the leper hospital of San Lazaro which had previously filled him with disgust. To each of the lepers he gave alms and kissed them on the hand.⁸ He began to stay with the lepers in their colonies and take care of them. “He washed their feet, bandaged sores, drew pus from wounds and wiped away filth.”⁹ He joined them in their isolation, willing embraced their rejection, and did not care that others despised him because of it.¹⁰

What could explain the dramatic nature of Francis’ change of heart towards lepers? Francis himself does not give us much of an insight into the dynamics of this conversion. He merely attests that, with the Lord leading him among lepers, what had previously seemed bitter “was turned into sweetness of soul and body.”¹¹ His biographers, however, attempt to fill in some of the gaps. What becomes clear is that this graced moment of conversion had a pre-history. It was prepared for by Francis’ naturally generous and impulsive character. It was heralded by his self-reflection and his struggles with his shortcomings. He had already begun his inward journey towards God in moments of solitude and prayer. His disillusionment with the world of power and wealth created an opening for the word of the Gospel, to be drawn by the poor Christ to embrace his poverty and weakness as the way to transformation.¹² The flame of charity had already been ignited within his heart. Though the sight of lepers would fill him with disgust, his pity towards them moved him to give alms through an intermediary.¹³

But in the imperfection of his humanity, there were also those obstacles that needed to be overcome and “ground down” by grace. Luciano Canonici portrays Francis as one who “aggressively combatted himself in a continuous, graced effort that sustained him against the

⁴ Ibid., n. 2.
⁷ Arnaldo Fortini, Francis of Assisi. Translated by Helen Moak. (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 211.
⁸ “The Legend of the Three Companions”, n. 11.
¹¹ Saint Francis of Assisi, “The Testament”, n. 3.
¹³ “The Legend of the Three Companions”, n. 11.
weakness in his nature, against a small-spiritedness.”\textsuperscript{14} Thus, in that key moment before the leper on the road, Francis is portrayed in words of Julian of Speyer as “doing violence to himself”, resisting the instinct to flee from the leper and move towards him instead.\textsuperscript{15} It demanded courage. It challenged his will. It called for humility, “to consider himself less and less, until by the mercy of the Redeemer, he came to complete victory over himself”\textsuperscript{16}, as Celano attests.

Through this battle, Francis discovers his true self. Returning to Guardini, we see that “the power of personality becomes stronger in proportion to the absence of interests.”\textsuperscript{17} Put another way: “a man becomes more fully himself the less he thinks of himself.” It is the struggle between the ‘false’ self of self-interest and the ‘true’ self of selflessness. Guardini interprets this as the condition of holiness:

“The saint is the person in whom the false self has been wholly conquered and the true self set free. Then the person is simply there without stressing himself. He is powerful without exertion. He no longer has desires or fears. He radiates. About him, things assume their truth and order.”\textsuperscript{18}

Significantly, Guardini himself illustrates this transformation from interest to disinterest with the example of St. Francis – who through his conformation to Christ crucified, confirmed in the sacred stigmata, had become “wholly transparent for God.”\textsuperscript{19} Nothing in him was an obstacle to God’s glory. His disinterestedness had made him accessible to God and man.

But we would surely misrepresent Francis’ conversion if we were to reduce it to some sort of psychological struggle to think less of himself. No, this was primarily a religious moment; an awakening in grace. In this decisive moment, Francis recognised the Lord’s initiative in calling and leading him: “for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them.”\textsuperscript{20} According to Francis’ own sentiments, the meeting of the leper on the road was no chance encounter. God willed it as a means of drawing close to him and speaking to his heart. The initiative was God’s. Francis was being awakened to a new reality: a new understanding of himself and his neighbour.

Furthermore, Francis acknowledges that his response to the leper – not to run away, as was his usual reaction, but to embrace him – was likewise empowered by God. The Lord was nudging him towards the leper, opening his eyes to see him as God sees him, and enflaming his heart with a love that overflowed in his impulsive embrace. Accordingly, Benedict XVI referred to this moment in the life of Francis as a truly religious experience, “commanded by the initiative of God’s grace and love.”\textsuperscript{21} His embrace of the leper was not merely a “philanthropic gesture” or “social conversion”. It was a moment of true religious conversion in which God was both reaching out to Francis and enabling him to respond through the gift of his grace.

Thus provoked by love, St. Francis was gifted with a new sensitivity. Through his encounter with Christ, Francis could perceive the truth of the human person as loved by God.

\textsuperscript{15} Julian of Speyer, “The Life of Saint Francis”, n. 12.
\textsuperscript{16} Thomas of Celano, “The Life of Saint Francis”, n. 17.
\textsuperscript{17} Guardini, \textit{Learning the Virtues}, 79.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 82.
He was graced with new sight, with what Benedict refers to as “a heart which sees”, that perceives “where love is needed and acts accordingly.”

Francis was able to recognize the other as his neighbor, and to perceive his need for a sign, for an expression, of love. He was thus “willing and able to physically touch and embrace the untouchables of his day, because he believed that all humans deserve reverence,” to embrace “in them whatever others loathed.”

He was awakened to new possibilities, new dimensions of his own humanity. He was empowered to do surprising and extraordinary things.

Furthermore, it was precisely those aspects about lepers which had previously filled him with disgust – their deformity, their smell, their disease, their neediness – that were now transformed for him into signs of something precious and sweet. With new eyes for the world, Francis was able to see in lepers an object of divine love: beings created in his image. More specifically, he recognized in them an image of the suffering Christ, who identifies himself with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lonely and rejected (Mt 25:35-36). Referring to this moment of conversion in the life of Francis, Saint Bonaventure writes:

“For previously not only had association with lepers horrified him greatly, so too did even gazing upon them from a distance. But, now because of Christ crucified, who according to the text of the prophet appeared despised as a leper, he, in order to despise himself completely, showed deed of humility and humanity to lepers with a gentle piety.”

In the fragile flesh of a broken man, in the suffering face of a leper, Francis perceived the awful reality of the Incarnation: of God’s kenotic self-emptying in the flesh of the Son of Man. As Canonici writes:

“With crude realism, Christ had to draw him close to the embrace of a man infected with leprosy, with the putrid body of bleeding ulcers: not only to contemplate and to meditate upon Him hanging on a painted cross, upon the altar. No, He is there, on the earth, in the body of the leper who appeared in front of him and blocked him way along the street.”

For Francis, therefore, lepers became a type of sacrament – what Canonici again calls an “eloquent image and sign of Christ: Christ who suffers; who took on the sins of the world; Christ who atoned with his own suffering; Christ marginalized by society; Christ who needed love.”

Thus, in that moment of awakening, of conversion, Francis perceived that it was Christ before him in the form of the leper. Some of his biographers make this explicit, noting that after Francis had embraced the leper, and continued on his way, on turning back he saw no one on the road: “and although the field was wide open, without any obstructions, when he looked around he could not see the leper anywhere.”

The leper had disappeared, drawing the reader to presume that it really was Christ himself in a leper’s disguise. And while this interpretation takes us beyond the historical event, it is symbolic of Francis’ new capacity to recognize Christ within the other, and to reverence him with a divine awe and respect.

It is my thesis that this moment of conversion with the leper becomes the hermeneutical key through which we should interpret the rest of Francis’ life. In particular, it serves as a paradigm of Francis’ welcome of the other in his midst. In the current context, it has particular

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22 Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Deus caritas est (2005), n. 31.
23 Nothwehr, The Franciscan View of the Human Person, 12.
24 Thomas of Celano, “The Legend for Use in the Choir,” n. 3
27 Ibid., 254.
significance for how we interpret Francis’ encounter with Sultan Malek Al-Kamil. Francis’ sojourn into Saracen lands must be interpreted in light of his conversion of heart; of having been awakened to see Christ in every human being. But this way of ‘seeing’ Christ must be qualified. How is Christ present in all people? How is He image in them?

To answer this, one might borrow from the mystical insights of one native to this land – I mean the 20th century poet/spiritual writer Caryll Houselander. Her genius consisted in giving form to this divine presence in all. In her autobiography *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*, she describes a mystical experience she had on a busy tube train in London in which she was overwhelmed be a keen sense of Christ present in them all: “Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them.”29 The life of God’s incarnate Son was variously present in each. She further describes a particular sensitivity to Christ present in the sinner, in whom “one must comfort Christ who is suffering in him.

And this reverence must be paid even to those sinners whose souls seem to be dead, because it is Christ, who is the life of the soul, who is dead in them; they are His tombs, and Christ in the tomb is potentially the risen Christ.”30

I contend that Houselander’s insight gives form to Francis’ experience, who saw in the leper the crucified Christ, and who recognised in the Sultan the seed of the Christ life: the Christ child, who in the limitations of his humanity, needed nurturing and instruction; the sleeping Christ in the boat, who needed to be awakened to pending danger; the dead Christ in the tomb, who lay waiting resurrection in the Spirit.

It was also for this reason that Francis was bold in his proclamation of Christ. For him, the uniqueness of Christ was not an obstacle to communion, but was its very means. By his incarnation, in which he has united himself to every human person, Christ had made everyone a brother and sister. Just so, for Francis, the other was not a threat to him, but rather one with whom he was called into communion; with whom he was united in Christ. As Sister Dawn Nothwehr writes: “Francis’s secret to being so open to others was the security he felt because of his relationship with Christ.”31 In centring his life on Christ, and thinking less of himself, Francis was able to see himself and others as we truly are – of who we are before God, and nothing more.32

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32 Francis of Assisi, “Admonition XIX”.