

Brother Francis: An Anthology of Writings By and About St. Francis of Assisi

Ed. Lawrence Cunningham
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Francis of Assisi, give us a break. It is hard enough to put up with all the maudlin hagiography, the plaster statuary, the arty movies and the saccharine evocation of your detachment from earthly riches. It is hard enough to have to dig through all the layers of textual criticism to attempt arriving at your historical presence. It is hard enough to be confronted simultaneously, as in this book, with Chesterton talking about your love of nature and Kazantzakis prompting you to dis-course on perfect love.

But these things can be taken in stride. What is really jolting is the

knowledge that behind all the pious demagoguery and the profane psychologizing there is an extraordinary experience, which, ineptly, sometimes even petulantly, so many inquiring Westerners have tried to articulate these seven centuries. It is not so much the impression that, given the temper of the 13th-century Mediterranean world, had you not existed, they would have had to invent you. It is the impression that having discovered you, they were taken aback by the enormity of the find and tried, by means hurried and ineffectual, like a Caribbean island preparing for a hurricane, to put together a reasonable defense against the fury of your logic. The improbable stories served as so many barriers. The more extraordinary you became, the less threatening, not to the putative establishment, but to each man's chosen definition of his role in life.

For what was at stake was not just the development of your father's mercantile capitalism or the survival of the pseudo-Dionysian hierarchization of the Church, but the success of a mandarin elite in leashing the Gospel to its lecture-hall chair. Scripture was becoming the preserve of the university, and its glosses were beginning to be preferred to the text. Scholastic systematic theology was fencing in the pasture lands of monastic meditation on the Scriptures. Thus one can understand stories of your dislike for books, 13th-century books full of formulas and appropriate anecdotes to be served up with them. But you took the Gospel literally, awfully literally, like a confident restorer who peels away the embellishments and reveals the original in all its glory. You read Saint Matthew the way Don Quixote read Amadis, so that you could be as troubled for having two coats as Don Quixote was for not having watched his arms properly. But in doing so you brought to light once more the power of the Gospel. People could match the Sermon on the Mount more easily with the joyful beggary of your followers than with the solemn distinctions of university preachers. And that same fierce literalness, like a cloud of nomads, is the permanent threat that hangs over our consumer society.

FERNANDO PICO

Watergate Honeymoon

Like every honeymoon, it was bound to end. I'm thinking of the glorious, gleeful honeymoon the press has luxuriated in since the Watergate morass was discovered and displayed to the public. Once that had happened, the press, so often battered and belittled by President Nixon, Vice President Agnew and others, was restored to a position of pride and honor.

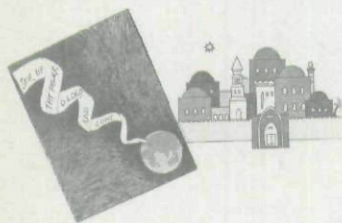
But now the honeymoon is over. The Watergate press has come under attack from a number of concerned citizens, partisan and otherwise. Some of the most surprising criticisms have come from the slingshots of journalists themselves. They provide, however, a study in contrasts.

Thus, Thomas Collins of *Newsday Service* recently lamented the fact that too many journalists covering the hearings are becoming participants rather than spectators. "The press is playing an active role in the proceedings and may shape the outcome in ways that have not yet been measured. It is more than a silent witness and recorder of Watergate: it is a full fledged partner in the event." How? By being lured into trading information with the Senate committee and suggesting questions to be asked of the witnesses. That temptation should have been resisted.

Mr. Collins then noted: "Opinions vary among newsmen about the propriety of suggesting questions and trading information. Bradlee [*Washington Post* editor] says flatly that the practice is bad. 'True journalists belong in the audience, not on the stage, with all their independence intact,' he said. 'That's a cardinal ethic.'" It is also common sense journalism.

On another plane, Dale Francis, editor of the *National Catholic Register*, lashed out against newspapers which "have failed to follow the rules of morality that they have insisted on" from government and others. He explained further: "In two or three months, there has been almost no person whose private testimony has not

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been released before his appearance before the Senate Select Committee."

Dale Francis considers such reporting immoral because it really "amounts to a theft of secret information." And where grand juries are concerned, he believes, it poses a threat to the nation's system of justice.

Such a view of journalistic ethics is somewhat simplistic. For we are not dealing here with private citizens and the conduct of private lives. Rather we are dealing with public affairs. We are confronting public officials with conduct that affects us all, conduct on which they impose self-serving secrecy.

There is, after all, the basic human right to be informed, a right vindicated by recent papal pronouncements as well as Vatican II documents. Does the right to privacy take precedence over the people's right to be informed, especially in the area of political life? I think not.

The gravest danger the Watergate affair poses to good journalism has been pinpointed by one of the men who played a crucial role in exposing the sordid mess. Writing in the June issue of the *Quill*, Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* remarked that the press has now achieved high credibility because of the Watergate exposé. With candor and humility he added: "Now I would just hate to see the balance go the other way and we use this as an excuse to start shooting from the hip. The reason that the *Washington Post* was able to make it through this story to the point where our credibility is now, or where I hope it is, is because we were very careful. We had some rules about not going with anything based on one source."

Mr. Bernstein concluded on this note: "I do hope that one of the lessons of all this is that we'll all become a little bit more responsible." And responsibility involves the prudent judgment on what to repress and what to express without yielding either to sensationalism or secrecy.

A footnote: I suspect that before long all journalists will agree that, as good as the Watergate coverage was, it was much too much. In the flood of words, the danger arose that intelligent interest would be drowned.

S. J. ADAMO

James: An Epistle of Straw?

What good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day, and you say to them, 'Good-bye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed,' but do not meet their bodily needs, what good is that? So it is with the faith that does nothing in practice. It is thoroughly lifeless. (Jas. 2:14-17, Second Reading of the 24th Sunday of the Year, September 16)

Passages from the Epistle of James provide the second reading at Mass from the 22nd through the 26th Sunday this year. Because today's reading is the midpoint of that series and gives the doctrinal heart of the whole epistle, it deserves attention.

The epistle is an exhortation. Its emphasis on right conduct as the test of salvation, expressed most pointedly here, has earned it a certain notoriety in Christian history, for it seems to be at odds with Paul's insistence that we have salvation through faith in Christ, not any works of our own. Martin Luther dismissed James as an "epistle of straw" because he thought it contradicted his doctrine (based on his reading of Paul) that justification comes from faith alone.

Although the emphases in Paul and James are different, no one would now claim that there is a contradiction between the two. When Paul downgrades "works" in relation to "faith," in his letters to the Galatians and Romans, he understands "works" as "prescriptions of the old law" and "faith" as a "loving adherence to Jesus Christ." There can be no doubt that, according to these definitions, faith has indeed superseded works. When, on the other hand, James says that "faith" without "works" is lifeless, he is saying that "intellectual assent" is lifeless without "acts of love and compassion," and, according to these quite different definitions of

"faith" and "works," James also is correct. The so-called conflict between the two apostles is more verbal than substantial, since it disappears as soon as one understands what each writer meant by "faith" and "works." For James, "good works" meant far more than the minute, ritualistic prescriptions of Jewish law; for Paul, "faith" meant more than mere intellectual assent to the gospel.

These are matters of more than just semantic or historical interest. They involve the central issues of Christian spirituality. James' emphasis on a demanding law of love means that his vision of things is a continuation of the Jewish tradition's longstanding insight that familiarity with God makes ethical demands. The commandments in the Pentateuch, the exhortations of the Wisdom books and the Prophets' denunciations of social irresponsibility are all evidence that the "old time religion" always had built within it, as a test of its validity, the norm of loving and compassionate "works." This is an invaluable part of our tradition, and certainly the words of Jesus Himself are full of this emphasis. Furthermore, it is particularly congenial to our own age, which heartily rejects any so-called religion that pretends to godliness without a real humanity. If James is an "epistle of straw," it is the straw necessary for making the bricks of love and compassion in God's temple.

Paul's emphasis on a loving adherence to Jesus Christ is the radically new element brought into this older tradition. Christ is the unique manifestation of the self-sacrificing intensity of God's love, and Paul's letters always insist that only in being joined to Christ can we participate fully in the meaning of God's world.

Christian spirituality, therefore, combines the old and the new. Our Lord teaches us that everyone "learned in the reign of God" must be *like the head of a household who can bring from his storeroom both the new and old* (Mt. 13:52). As James insists, we must do the good, not only talk about it. With Paul, we must recognize that whatever good we do has been won by Christ, and is not done on our own.

THOMAS H. STAHEL, S. J.

