



*"You will know them by their fruits." Mt. 7:16*

# The Sanctification of St. Francis of Assisi

## THE GUEST OF THE SOUL

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### CONTENTS

(7 of 54 pages selected)

#### PREFACE

Chapter 1 THE ATONEMENT

Chapter 2 THE BLESSEDNESS OF THE PENTECOSTAL EXPERIENCE

Chapter 3 THE GUEST OF THE SOUL

Chapter 4 THE TRIAL OF FAITH WROUGHT INTO EXPERIENCE

Chapter 5 A PERFECT-HEARTED PEOPLE

**Chapter 6 A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY SALVATIONIST**

Chapter 7 LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD AFTER SEVENTY YEARS

Chapter 8 TEXTS THAT HAVE BLESSED ME

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## Chapter 6

### A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY SALVATIONIST

Most of the Ten Commandments can be made into laws of the land by legislative enactment, but not so the Sermon on the Mount. It is not only a sin, it is a crime, a breach of law, to murder and steal. But no statesman has ever yet passed a law compelling men to be poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure of heart, loving to enemies, and glad when lied about and persecuted. A man may be restrained by the strong hand of the law from stealing or committing murder; but he can be constrained only by grace to be meek and lowly in heart, to bless them that curse him, to pray for them that spitefully use him, and to love them that hate him.

“The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John i. 17). He was “full of grace and truth” (John i. 14). When His heart broke on Calvary it was like the breaking of Mary’s alabaster box of ointment. And when He poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, rivers of grace and truth began to stream forth to every land, to all people.

The nature-religions and philosophies of the Gentile world, and the religion of the Scribes and Pharisees, sunk into legal forms and ceremonies, were powerless to give peace to troubled consciences, strength to slaves of vice and corruption, or life to souls dead in trespasses and sin. But this is just what the grace of God in Christ did. It met and fitted the moral and spiritual needs of men as light meets the eye, as the skin fits the hand.

When Paul went to luxurious, licentious Corinth and preached Christ to the revelling populace, lo! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, sodomites, thieves, covetous people, drunkards and revellers became saints. Their eyes were

opened, their darkness vanished, their chains fell off, and they received “beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isa. Lxi. 3). Christ made them free. They loved each other. They lived in close association with each other, but they did not shut themselves away from their unsaved neighbours. They went everywhere declaring the good news of redeeming love and uttermost salvation in Christ.

But not all who named the name of Christ departed from iniquity. Heresies crept in. Persecutions arose. The awful corruptions and subtle philosophies of the heathen world undermined the morals, weakened the courage, and dimmed or destroyed the faith of many. The whole social and political order of the ancient world began to crumble. The Roman empire fell before the assaults of northern barbarians, and the Dark Ages supervened. The secret of salvation and sanctification by faith, which made Paul’s converts in Corinth victorious over the proud and putrid world in which they lived, the flesh which had enslaved them and the Devil who had deceived them, was largely if not wholly lost.

Earnest souls, sick of sin, weary of strife, and ignorant of the way of victorious faith in an indwelling Christ, fled to the desert and wilderness to escape temptation. Many of them became hermits, living solitary lives on pillars in the desert and in dens and caves of the earth, while others formed monastic communities of monks and nuns. They harked back to the grim austerity and.

Asceticism of Elijah and John the Baptist, and lost the sweet reasonableness and holy naturalness of Jesus. In the solitude of desert dens and the darkness of wilderness caves and on the tops of lonely pillars they kept painful vigil and fought bitter battles with devils. With prolonged fastings and flagellations they struggled to overcome the unsanctified passions of the flesh.

There were saints among these seekers, who found God and kept sacred learning and faith alive.

It was the hermit St. Jerome who translated the Scriptures into the common language, giving us the version known as the Vulgate. It was the monk Thomas a’ Kempis who wrote “The Imitation of Christ.” While some of the sweetest and most stirring hymns of Christendom leaped forth from glad and loving hearts, in monasteries of the Dark Ages. Those ages were dark, but not wholly dark.

As the iron empire of Rome, corroded and rusted by luxury and utterly corrupt vices, began to crumble and fall before the fierce, barbaric hordes of the north, feudalism sprang up and the great mass of men became serfs who tilled the fields and fought the wars of petty lords who lived in castles overlooking the towns and villages that dotted the plains. Towns and cities torn and reddened by internal factional strife made war on each other. The baron made war on his enemy, the rich abbot, and endowed and adorned his castle and church with spoils of his petty warfare. The clergy were generally greedy and corrupt. Poverty, illiteracy, filth and disease were universal. Brigands infested the forests and mountains, and pitiful, loathsome lepers begged for alms along the highways.

It was at the end of a thousand years of such dimness and darkness, when was breaking a new dawn which he was greatly to hasten, that St. Francis of Assisi appeared. He was the son of a prosperous Italian cloth merchant and of a gentle and devout French lady who probably sprang from the nobility. A beautiful, courteous lad, with flashing eyes and equally flashing spirit, who sang the songs of the troubadours in his mother’s native tongue, delighted in the sports and revelry and dare-devil doings of the youth of the town – such was Francis Bernadone. Little did he seem to have in him the stuff of a saint who should transform the Christendom of his day and hold the wondering and affectionate gaze of seven centuries. His father was a tradesman, but he was rich and free-handed with his dashing and attractive son.

The boy was lavish with money, courteous and gay of spirit, which made him the friend and companion of the young nobility who dwelt in castles. War broke out between Assisi and the city of Perugia, so Francis, burning with the pride of youth and the fires of patriotism, went forth with the young noblemen and their bands of serfs to fight the enemy. But the battle went against the Assisians, and a company of the leaders, with Francis, were captured and spent a year in prison.

The youthful aristocrats, deprived of liberty, languished, but Francis, whom they kept among them, never lost his spirit, but cheered them with his kindness, his gaiety, and his songs. He laughed and sang and made merry, and possibly half in jest but more in earnest, through some strange youthful premonition, he assured them that he would one day be a great prince, with his name on the lips of all men. Little did he or they suspect what kind of a prince he

would be, or the nature of the acclaim with which men would greet him.

Months of sickness followed his imprisonment. He began to think on the things that are eternal, the things of the spirit. Recovered from his illness, he went forth again on a fine steed, in glittering armour, to war. But, for some rather obscure reason, he returned and fell into strange meditative moods. His companions suspected that it was an affair of the heart, and asked him if he was dreaming of a lady-love. He admitted that he was --a fairer love than they had ever imagined: Lady Poverty! He was thinking of giving up all for Christ.

One day, while Francis was serving a customer in his father's shop, a beggar came in and asked for alms in the name of God. Francis, busy with his customer, sent him away empty-handed, but afterwards said to himself, "If he had asked in the name of some nobleman, how promptly and generously I should have responded. But he asked in the name of the Lord, and I sent him away with nothing!" Leaving the shop, he ran after the beggar and lavished money upon him, and from that day he was the unfailing friend of beggars and all the poor.

Lepers were peculiarly repulsive to him, and he stood in a kind of fear of them. One day when riding he met a leper, and a fear he would not have felt on a field of battle gripped him. He rode past the poor creature and then, ashamed of himself, he won a greater victory than ever was won by armed warriors on a field of blood. He wheeled his horse about and returned, and leaping down he kissed the leper and gave him all the money he had with him. Joy filled his heart, and ever after he was the friend, the benefactor and the frequent nurse and companion of lepers.

He was a creature of generous, self-sacrificing impulse, but once he yielded to the impulse it became a life-long principle, and he served it with unfailing devotion of a lover to his mistress. As yet, however, like little Samuel, he "did not.... know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him" (I Sam. Iii. 7). But one day he was praying before the altar in a poor, half-ruined little church: "Great and glorious God, and Thou, Lord Jesus, I pray, shed abroad Thy light in the darkness of my mind. Be found of me, O Lord, so in all things I may act only in accordance with Thy Holy Will." His eyes were upon a crucifix as he prayed, and it seemed to him that the eyes of the Saviour met his. The place suddenly became a holy place, and he was in the presence of the Lord and Saviour as was Moses when he drew near the burning bush on Horeb.

The sacred Victim seemed alive, and as a Voice spoke to Moses from the bush, so a wondrous, sweet, ineffable Voice seemed to speak from the crucifix to the longing soul of Francis, bidding him repair the church that was falling into decay and ruin. From that day he was assured that Christ knew him, heard him, loved him, and wanted his service. He could say: "I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine."

Francis was essentially a man of action rather than of contemplation, so instead of retiring to a hermit's lodge in the desert or a monastery on some hill-top, he sallied forth at once to repair the little church of St. Damien in which he had been praying and had heard the Voice. He begged stones and carried them himself, repairing the church with his own hands, and when that was completed he repaired yet another church. It had not yet dawned upon him that the Voice was calling him to repair, not the four walls of a church made with hands, but the spiritual Church with its living stones not built with hands.

His proud and disappointed father fell upon him, beat him, and imprisoned him in his home; but during the absence of his father his mother released him, and he returned to the church, where he lived with the priest, wearing, instead of his gay clothing, a hair shirt and a rough brown robe tied around him with a rope, which was later to become the uniform of the myriad brothers of the Franciscan Order. He worked or begged for his bread and in Assisi was looked upon as a madman.

His father and brother cursed him when they saw him.

He publicly renounced all right to his patrimony and adopted utter poverty as one of the rules of his life. He made poverty one of the rules -- indeed, the most distinctive rule of the Order which he founded. And later, when the Bishop of Assisi gently reproved him and argued that he should not go to such an extreme, he silenced the Bishop, who had trouble with his own riches, by shrewdly replying, "If we own property we must have laws and arms to defend them, and this will destroy love out of our hearts."

In a short time -- as with a true Salvationist, with any true Christian -- the sincerity, the sweetness, the joy and devotion of his life began to disarm criticism, win approval, and cause searchings of heart in many of his fellow townsmen.

His first convert was a wealthy man who had been impressed by his joyous, simple life. He invited Francis to spend the night with him, and only simulated sleep that he might watch the young man.

When Francis thought he was asleep, he knelt by his bedside and spent most of the night in prayer.

Next morning Bernardo, who became one of the most noted and devout of the brothers, decided to sell all, give to the poor, and cast in his lot with Francis.

A third, named Pietro, joined himself to them, and the three went to church where, after praying and examining the Scriptures, they adopted as the rule of their new life the words of Jesus: If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me (Matt. Xix. 21).

Jesus, having called the twelve, gave them power and authority over an devils, and to cure diseases. And He sent them to preach the Kingdom of God..... And He said unto them, Take nothing for your journey, neither staves, nor scrip, neither bread, neither money; neither have two coats apiece. And whatsoever house ye enter into, there abide, and thence depart. And whosoever will not receive you, when ye go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet for a testimony against them. And they departed, and went through the towns, preaching the gospel, and healing every where (Luke ix. 1-6).

The literal strictness with which Francis and his early disciples followed and enforced the rule of utter poverty gave them great freedom from care, great freedom of movement, and much joy. But, later, this led to much strife and division in the Order, the beginnings of which in his lifetime saddened the last days of the saint.

The Pope sanctioned his Rule and granted him and the members of the Order the right to preach.

Like the early disciples they went everywhere testifying, singing, preaching, labouring with their hands for food, and, when unable to get work, not hesitating to ask from door to door for bread.

At first they were scorned and often beaten, but they gloried in tribulation. My brothers, commit yourselves to God with all your cares and He will care for you," said Francis, and they went with joy, strictly observing his instructions:

Let us consider that God in His goodness has called us not merely for our own salvation, but also for that of many men, that we may go through all the world exhorting men, more by our example than by our words, to repent of their sins and keep the commandments. Be not fearful because we appear little and ignorant. Have faith in God, that His Spirit will speak in and by you.

You will find men, full of faith, gentleness, and goodness, who will receive you and your words with joy; but you will find others, and in great numbers, faithless, proud, blasphemers, who will speak evil of you, resisting you and your words. Be resolute, then, to endure everything with patience and humility.

Have no fear, for very soon many noble and learned men will come to you; they will be with you preaching to kings and princes and to a multitude of people. Many will be converted to the Lord all over the world, who will multiply and increase His family.

How like William Booth that sounds!

And what he preached, Francis practised to the end. He died prematurely, surrounded by his first followers, exhausted, blind and, at his own request, stripped, but for a hair shirt, and laid upon the bare ground. His Rule, his Order, his life and example were a stern and mighty rebuke to the wealth, the greed and the laziness of the priests and the monks. But he exhorted his brethren not to judge others, not to condemn or be severe, but to honour them, give them all due respect and pray for them, remembering some whom they might think to be members of the Devil would yet become members of Christ.

Within a brief time five thousand friars in brown robes were going everywhere with their glad songs, their burning exhortations, their simple testimony and sacrificial lives, and all who met them met with a spiritual adventure not to be forgotten. In Spain some of them fell upon martyrdom. They went to Germany, France, and to far Scandinavia, where they built the great cathedral of Upsala.

Francis himself went to the Holy Land with the crusaders, and at the risk of his life, with two of his brothers boldly entered the camp of the Saracens and sought to convert the Saracen leader and his host. In this he failed, but he

made a deep impression on the followers of Mohammed.

Once he was called to preach before the Pope and the College of Cardinals. He carefully prepared his sermon, but when he attempted to deliver it he became confused, frankly confessed his confusion, forgot his prepared address, threw himself upon the Lord, and spoke from his heart as moved by the Spirit – spoke with such love and fire that he burned into all hearts and melted his august audience to many tears. Long before Hus and Luther appeared, thundering against the abuses of the Church, he wrought a great reformation by love, by simplicity, and self-sacrifice. He was a kindred spirit of George Fox and John Wesley and William Booth, and would have gloried in their fellowship.

After seven centuries his words are still as sweet as honey, as searching as fire, as penetrating and revealing as light. One winter's day, bitterly cold, he was journeying with a Brother Leo, when he said: May it please God that the Brothers Minor (the 'Little Brothers,' the name he adopted for the Franciscan Order) all over the world may give a great example of holiness and edification. But not in this is the perfect joy. If the Little Brothers gave sight to the blind, healed the sick, cast out demons, gave hearing to the deaf, or even raised the four-days' dead – not in this is the perfect joy.

"If a Brother Minor knew all languages, all science, and all scripture, if he could prophesy and reveal not only future things, but even the secret of consciences and of souls – not in this consists the perfect joy.

If he could speak the language of angels, if he knew the courses of the stars and the virtues of plants, if all the treasures of earth were revealed to him, and he knew the qualities of birds, fishes, and all animals, of men, trees, rocks, roots, and waters – not in these is the perfect joy."

"Father, in God's name, I pray you," exclaimed Leo, "tell me in what consists the perfect joy."

"When we arrive at Santa Maria degli Angeli (soaked with rain, frozen with cold, covered with mud, dying of hunger)," said Francis, "and we knock, and the porter comes in a rage, saying 'Who are you?' and we answer, 'We are two of your brethren,' and he says, 'You lie; you are two lewd fellows who go up and down corrupting the world and stealing the alms of the poor. Go away!'" and he does not open to us, but leaves us outside in the snow and rain, frozen, starved, all night – then, if thus maltreated and turned away we patiently endure all without murmuring against him; if we think with humility and charity that this porter really knows us truly and that God makes (permits) him to speak to us thus, in this is the perfect joy. Above all the graces and all the gifts which the Holy Spirit gives to His friends is the grace to conquer one's self, and willingly to suffer pain, outrages, disgrace, and evil treatment for the love of Christ."

This sounds very like echoes from the Sermon on the Mount and the epistles and testimonies of Paul. It is a commentary upon Paul's Psalm of Love in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, and on his testimony: "I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake" (2 Cor. Xii. 10).

It is a commentary on the words of Jesus: "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke xii. 13), and on those other, often forgotten and neglected words: Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad (Matt. v. 11, 12).

Francis had found the secret of joy, of power, of purity, and of that enduring influence which still stirs and draws out the hearts of men of faith, of simplicity, of a single eye. Across the centuries he speaks to us in a wooing, compelling message that humbles us at the feet of Jesus in contrition and adoring wonder and love.

He found hidden reservoirs of power in union with Christ; in following Christ; in counting all things loss for Christ; in meekly sharing the labours, the travail, the passion, and the Cross of Christ.

Thus his life became creative instead of acquisitive. He became a builder, a fighter, a creator; he found his joy, his fadeless glory, his undying influence, not in possessing things, not in attaining rank and title and worldly pomp and power, but in building the spiritual house, the Kingdom of God – in fighting the battles of the Lord against the embattled hosts of sin and hate and selfishness.

This creative life he found in the way of sacrifice and service. He found his life by losing it. He laid down his life and found it again, found it multiplied a thousandfold, found it being reproduced in myriads of other men.

And this I conceive to be the supreme lesson of the life of Francis for us of The Salvation Army, and for the whole Church of God to-day. For it remains eternally true, it is a law of the Spirit, it is the everlasting word of Jesus, that:

He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it (Matt. x.39).

O Lord I help me, help Thy people everywhere, help the greedy, grasping, stricken world, to learn what mean these words of the Master, and to put them to the test with the deathless, sacrificial ardour of the simple, selfless saint of Assisi!

I knew that Christ had given me birth  
To brother all the souls of earth,  
And every bird and every beast  
Should share the crumbs broke at the feast.

*John Masefield.*

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