

FOREWORD

For me, participating in the conclave that elected Pope Francis was a Pentecost experience right out of the Acts of the Apostles. Catholics all over the world prayed for the Church, the cardinals, and the conclave so that the Holy Spirit would guide us. I have no doubt that all our prayers were answered. In the gospels, Jesus is always seeking those at the periphery and bringing them to center stage. By having a pope from the Southern Hemisphere the Church is doing that. I am sure that Pope Francis will be a great stimulus and an encouragement to our brothers and sisters in those parts of the world.

I am also convinced that Pope Francis's unswerving devotion to the poor and the social gospel of the Church will touch the hearts of many in the secularized countries of Europe and North America, helping them to see the Church in a new light. Our love for the poor is never just philanthropy; it is rather the evangelical poverty that inspired St. Francis to kiss the leper, to give all his wealth to the poor, to see Lady Poverty as freedom from the shackles of wealth. In the context of faith, embracing the spirit of poverty is an expression of humility, seeking the last place at the table in order to be near to Christ who has come to

wash our feet. We are called to the detachment that allows us to recognize the poor and the suffering as an icon of the crucified Lord—as a manifestation of his presence in the world.

I am confident that Pope Francis’s love for the poor and his passion for the social gospel will help galvanize the Church to greater fidelity to the gospel and a renewed commitment to building a civilization of love. We do these works of mercy, caring for the poor and needy, because we are Catholics and it is what we are supposed to do. I often reflect on the occasion in the Gospel when Jesus took his disciples to the Temple to point out to them the poor widow who dropped her last penny in the collection basket. Jesus didn’t say anything to the woman; he didn’t give her the money back. He simply wanted his disciples to see and appreciate the faith and generosity of the poor widow.

Monsignor Murphy spent ten years in Italy as a seminarian and later as rector of the Pontifical North American College. During those years he grew in his love for St. Francis of Assisi and became convinced that St. Francis can guide us in the needed rebuilding of the Church in our day and the repair of our secular society. He had completed his book setting forth St. Francis’s program of renewal and reform when our new Holy Father took the name of Francis out of the same conviction. Monsignor Murphy was thus able to incorporate into this book the vision of Pope Francis, which exemplifies so well the witness of St. Francis. May this book contribute to the new evangelization deeply needed at this particular moment of history.

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PREFACE

A few weeks before Pope Francis's election as the new pope, I had completed this manuscript on St. Francis of Assisi and the new evangelization—or so I thought. Then came this amazing coincidence: the new pope embraced Francis as the model for his pontificate. I prefer to think that this was not really a coincidence but rather a shared vision of how the Church can be renewed and how people today can be helped to find faith once again.

I want to express my gratitude for the gracious Foreword to this book contributed by Cardinal Seán O'Malley O.F.M., Cap., archbishop of Boston. As a close collaborator of Pope Francis, Cardinal O'Malley shares his vision for the rebuilding of the Church and its Franciscan inspiration. A mutual friend, Cardinal William Baum, once said to me, "Seán O'Malley is the finest priest I know." I have reason to see why.

During the past twenty years I have been working with permanent deacons as their diocesan director. St. Francis himself was a deacon who sought to be "a living gospel for all to hear." May all deacons of today's Church who have taken Francis as their model carry out their mission to "believe what you read, preach what you believe, and practice what you preach."

INTRODUCTION

A summer ago I spent time exploring New Mexico for the first time. I had two reasons for going. I wanted to attend the Santa Fe Opera, founded by the late John Crosby, a cousin of parishioners of mine. I also had been looking forward to visiting close friends who have a home in Santa Fe. She is an artist, he an aspiring writer after a long career in business.

Together we attended two operas in the spectacular setting of the new opera house with its open sides and stage that reveal the sun as it sets. Besides spending time in Santa Fe, we visited Taos to see Ghost Ranch, the home of Georgia O’Keeffe, and stayed at the former home of Mabel Dodge Luhan, who came to Taos in 1918 from New York. There she entertained D. H. Lawrence and his wife, Freida; Ansel Adams; Martha Graham; Georgia O’Keeffe herself; and many others in those comfortable rooms.

My friends were anxious for me to spend some time with their son and daughter-in-law who live in Santa Fe year-round. For years the son has devoted himself to environmental causes, making regular lobbying trips to Washington and heading up a nonprofit organization promoting the ecological well-being of the Southwest. He has taken

a longtime interest in the Rio Grande River, which he has been trying to preserve as a single, magnificent ecosystem. The son's wife teaches part-time. One of the courses she teaches is on nonviolent techniques, with a particular emphasis on nonviolent speech. Both were baptized Catholics. She once taught in a Catholic elementary school, but neither has much contact with Catholicism today.

The five of us met several times during my stay. Our best conversation was on a Sunday morning at the young couple's home on the outskirts of Santa Fe, a spacious single-floor dwelling with an ample veranda opening out onto the vegetable gardens from which they harvest much of their food. The brunch was on the veranda, and the main course was a vegetable quiche. Both are vegetarians.

My two friends and I attended Mass at the Cathedral of San Francisco de Asis in the city and then proceeded to drive out to our brunch invitation. In my tour of the house I visited the separate zones they have created for their private time: a place to do crafts and meditate for her, and likewise a meditation room for him where he could also practice his cello.

I was impressed with their spiritual view of life, their attachment to the landscape, and their commitment to social justice. Over the course of our leisurely conversation, I asked if they knew much about St. Francis of Assisi, with whom they seemed to share so much. They said they did not.

Perhaps the new way of evangelizing is not so much through confrontation and argument but through conversation, dialogue, and affirmation, a way that allows us to reach out to people similar to my friends in New Mexico who already have a spiritual life and who can be introduced

to Christ by someone such as St. Francis. St Francis seems the perfect guide to lead so many in our times into deeper waters.

Originally a phrase used by Jesus (Lk 5:4), “Deeper waters,” is an image Blessed John Paul II evoked in his apostolic letter on the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ. He continued: “Despite widespread secularization, there is a widespread demand for spirituality.”¹ We are called to engage that demand for spiritual truths in spite of the overarching movement toward secularization. St. Francis pioneered this method in a different context during his conversations with the sultan of Egypt in the extreme situation of the Third Crusade against Islam. Whereas most would have been overwhelmed by the surface differences, Francis cast into deeper waters.

In proclaiming a “Year of Faith” from October 2012 to November 2013, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI called a synod on what is being called the “new evangelization.” New evangelization is defined as a renewed dynamism, inspired by the Holy Spirit, which allows the Church to repropose its message, especially to those who, like my friends, have drifted away. As indicated in a synodal document, “The new evangelization is primarily directed to these people, so that they can rediscover the beauty of their Christian faith and the joy of a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus in the church and in the community of the faithful.”²

Among the synod’s final propositions is the following:

The universal call to holiness is constitutive of the new evangelization that sees the saints as effective models of the variety and forms in which this vocation can be realized. What is common in the varied stories of holiness is the following of Christ expressed in a life of

faith active in charity which is a privileged proclamation of the gospel.³

In this book I propose St. Francis of Assisi (1186–1226) as a preeminent saintly model for the new evangelization. He inspired in his own lifetime what is generally recognized as the greatest spiritual renewal the Church has ever experienced in her long history. Pope Paul VI, who originally pointed to evangelization as the Church’s essential mission, said that “people today listen more to witnesses than to teachers. Witnesses to Jesus Christ demonstrate their faith especially by the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, that is, by the witness of a holy life.”⁴ St. Francis of Assisi, known in his own day as *il poverello*, “the little poor one,” is just such a needed witness and model. Francis achieved this astounding and still-normative spiritual renewal precisely because his personal holiness was founded upon poverty of spirit and resistance to the prevailing culture of his time, a culture that in so many ways resembles our own. According to his official biographer, St. Bonaventure, Francis “is the outstanding follower of Jesus crucified.”⁵

The ultimate reason for Francis’s appeal is that he resembles Christ. Francis fascinates because Christ is fascinating. Today many are careful to eat well, rest, diet, exercise, and expand their minds in cultural pursuits—all of which can be appropriate—but often these same people neglect their spiritual needs. When they notice the spiritual emptiness inside of them, many look for spiritual fulfillment anywhere but in Christ. They feel they “know” Christ, they understand Christianity, and, dissatisfied, they want something more. But often they do not know Christ, for they have encountered at most a child’s version of him.

This was the case with my friends in New Mexico, and that is why I wanted to introduce the actual Christ to them by means of St. Francis of Assisi.

In the first part of this book I explore the similarities of St. Francis's world and ours in terms of the challenge of evangelization. In the second part I lay out a program to accomplish this evangelization rooted in ways St. Francis exemplified. As will be clear, that program requires not mere pious words or new Church organizations; it is the very countercultural challenge of living out and bearing witness to Jesus' invitation: "Come, follow me" (Mt 19:21).

The New Testament definition of a disciple is "one who follows." The disciples literally lived with their master, learning his ways by observing the smallest details of his life—following him around. Since Christ's resurrection, the New Testament meaning of being a disciple comes to be not "to follow" as much as "to imitate." St. Paul, for example, never speaks of *following* Christ but of *imitating* him, taking on his mind.

Have among yourselves the same [mind] attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5–8)

As I make clear in the second part of this book, this mind of Christ includes the priority of God, the preferential love of the poor, voluntary poverty, care for creation,

and the pursuit of peace. These are the ways by which the Church will be rebuilt.

PART ONE

ST. FRANCIS'S
WORLD AND OURS

A SAINT FOR TODAY

St. Francis admirably fulfills the three criteria proposed by the synod's working document on the new evangelization, for (a) he makes the Christian life seem plausible and attractive even in the circumstances of today, (b) the witness of his life manifests the possibility that the world itself can be changed, and (c) he shows that this all can be done in complete union with the Church.

In the 1920s the eminent British journalist, fiction writer, and convert to Catholicism Gilbert Keith Chesterton wrote a book on St. Francis of Assisi, a book that has been in print ever since. In many ways it is a typically Chesterton production: ruminative and digressive. I picture Chesterton dictating the book to his stenographer with various reference works scattered around him on the floor. The book betrays the prejudices of the time, particularly with regard to Muslims, but basically Chesterton gets Francis right.

In the end his audience is the same as mine. He says he is not writing for the liberal skeptics who admire an image of Francis of Assisi who is a humanitarian hero and lover of birds and animals, "a saint without God." Neither is his intended audience those religious devotees who are comfortable with stigmata and fights against dragons. Chesterton

writes “for the modern outsider and enquirer,” as he himself once was, who may regard aspects of Francis’s life as attractive but also somewhat remote and even repulsive—in other words, “the ordinary modern person, sympathetic but skeptical.”¹ This skepticism abounds. During a recent visit to Assisi, our guide, a modern Italian woman, pointed out with a slight smile the thorn bush onto which St. Francis supposedly hurled himself to avert an episode of sexual desire.

Chesterton confronts the doubting modern mind directly. He shows us Francis, the all too human, self-described lover and troubadour, but enunciates the fact that his first love was God. The point to his life story, then, the precipice to which everything else leads, is Francis’s embrace of the cross. For Chesterton, Francis is nothing less than the Mirror of Christ whose counsels of perfection, followed to the letter by *il poverello* and his companions, were intended “to astonish and awaken the world.”²

Contemporary author Joseph Bottum sets forth much the same insight—this time about the Church reflecting divinity—in a column he wrote soon after Pope Francis’s election. He writes:

The Catholic Church is not one of the last surviving medieval institutions in the world. Even in the Middle Ages, it was old, for the church is the world’s only surviving ancient institution—born in a world shaped by Alexander’s conquests, deriving from a time of Roman rule. And we will never understand it, never grasp its fundamentally counter-cultural nature, unless we recognize this fact. In every age, somewhere in the church, there flashes into the present moment a religious claim—a divine revelation, say its believers—from the ancient world.³

Blessed John Paul II, who selected Assisi as the pilgrimage site for his first assembly of world religious leaders praying for peace in 1986, said of Francis that he was “great in the thirteenth century but he has become even more important today.” Already considered a saint at the time of his death, October 3, 1226, Francis was canonized only two years later in 1228 by Pope Gregory IX, who said of him on that occasion, “He shone in his days as a morning star in the midst of clouds.”⁴

St. Elizabeth, the young widow of the king of Hungary, became a secular Franciscan and was renowned for her love of the poor before her early death in 1231—only five years after the death of St. Francis himself. This exemplifies how quickly widespread was the spiritual renewal he inspired.

Like us, Francis lived in a time when the Church was in a new situation and ripe for renewal. The twelfth century saw the revival of arts and learning across Europe, including the vernacular poetry associated with the troubadours. The election at the age of thirty-seven of the noble and learned Innocent III saw the initial establishment of the papal states and an immense enlargement of the papal prestige; Innocent was the first to call himself “vicar of Christ.” Although his sponsorship of the Fourth Crusade to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims proved to be a debacle, Innocent’s convocation of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1206 was, according to the historian John O’Malley, “one of the largest and most impressive assemblies in the Middle Ages and the largest council in the history of the church up to that point.”⁵ Like the Second Vatican Council, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 was a council concerned with reformation. It created what ever after has been called the “Easter duty”: to remain in good