

Francis: Innovator with and not against the Pope

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FRANCIS OF ASSISI, A GIANT OF SANCTITY

VATICAN CITY, 27 JAN 2010 (VIS) -

Benedict XVI dedicated his catechesis during the general audience, held this morning in the Paul VI Hall, to St. Francis of Assisi (1181/82 - 1226), a "true 'giant' of sanctity who continues to enthral many people of all ages and religious beliefs".

Francis, the Pope explained, was born into a rich family and passed a carefree youth. At the age of twenty he took part in a military campaign and was taken prisoner. On his return to Assisi he began a process of spiritual conversion that gradually led him to abandon worldly life. In the hermitage of St. Damian, Francis had a vision of Christ, Who spoke to him from the crucifix inviting him to repair His Church.

This call "contains a profound symbolism", said the Holy Father, because the ruinous condition of the hermitage also represented "the dramatic and disquieting situation of the Church at that time, with her superficial faith that neither formed nor transformed life, her clergy little committed to its duties, ... and the interior decay of her unity due to the rise of heretical movements. Yet nonetheless, at the middle of that Church in ruins was the Crucifix, which spoke and called for renewal, which called Francis".

Pope Benedict also remarked upon the coincidence between that event in Francis' life and the dream of Pope Innocent III in the same year of 1207. The Pope had dreamt that the basilica of St. John Lateran was about to collapse, and a "small and insignificant" friar held it up to prevent its fall. Pope Innocent recognised the friar in Francis, who came to see him in Rome two years later.

"Innocent III", said Benedict XVI, "was a powerful Pontiff, who possessed profound theological culture as well as great political power, but it was not he who renewed the Church. It was the 'small and insignificant' friar, it was Francis, called by God. Yet it is important to recall that Francis did not renew the Church without the Pope or against the Pope, but in communion with him. The two things went together: Peter's Successor, the bishops and the Church founded on apostolic succession, and the new charism that the Spirit had created at that moment to renew the Church".

Having renounced his paternal inheritance in 1208, the saint elected to live in poverty and dedicate himself to preaching. A year later, accompanied by his first followers, he travelled to Rome to present his project for a new form of Christian life to Pope Innocent III.

Referring then to the philosophical debate concerning, on the one hand, the Francis of tradition and, on the other, the Francis some scholars define as historical, the Pope explained that the saint "wished to follow the Word of Christ ... in all its radical truth", but at the same time "he was aware that Christ is never 'mine' but 'ours', that 'I' can never possess Him, that 'I' can never rebuild against the Church, her will and her teaching".

It is also true that at first Francis "did not wish to create a new order" with all the due canonical procedures. However, not without disappointment, he came to understand "that everything must have its order and that the law of the Church is necessary to give form to renewal. Thus he entered ... with all his heart into communion with the Church, with the Pope and the bishops".

The Holy Father recalled how St. Clare also joined the school of St. Francis, and he praised the fruits that the Second Order of St. Francis, the Poor Clares, has brought to the Church. He then went on to speak of Francis' 1219 voyage to Egypt, where he met the Sultan Melek-el-Kamel and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "In an age marked by an ongoing conflict between Christianity and Islam, Francis, armed only with the faith and his personal gentleness, effectively followed the path of dialogue. ... His is a model which even today must inspire relations between Christian and Muslims: promote dialogue in truth, in reciprocal respect and mutual understanding".

The Pope also referred to the possibility that Francis might have visited the Holy Land and pointed out that the saint's spiritual children have made the Holy Places a privileged place for their mission. "I think with gratitude", he said, "of the great merits of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land".

Francis, who died in 1226, "lying on the bare earth" of the Porziuncola, "represents an 'alter Christus'", and this "was, in fact, his ideal, ... to imitate Christ's virtues. In particular, he wished to give fundamental value to interior and exterior poverty, also teaching this to his spiritual children. ... The witness of Francis, who loved poverty in order to follow Christ with complete devotion and freedom, continues to be, also for us today, an invitation to cultivate interior poverty so as to develop our trust in God, with a sober lifestyle and a detachment from material

goods.

"In Francis", the Pope added, "love for Christ was expressed in a special way in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist". He also mentioned the saint's great admiration for priests "because they have received the gift of consecrating the Eucharist. ... Let us never forget", he said, "that the sanctity of the Eucharist requires us to be pure, to live in a manner coherent with the Mystery we celebrate".

Another characteristic of the saint's spirituality was "the sense of universal fraternity and love for nature which inspired him to write the 'Laudes Creaturarum'. This is a very relevant message because ... the only form of sustainable development is that which respects creation and does not harm the environment", and "even the construction of lasting peace is linked to respect for the environment. Francis reminds us that that the creation reflects the wisdom and benevolence of the Creator".

The Holy Father concluded by describing Francis as "a great saint and a joyful man. ... There exists, in fact, an intimate and indissoluble bond between sanctity and joy. A French author once wrote that only one sadness exists in the world: that of not being saints".