

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

October 3, 2021 – FEAST OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI (*transferred*.)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Finding Our True Selves in Christ Crucified*”

Job 39:1–18	(God is the Creator of all things)
Psalms 121	(Our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth)
Galatians 6:14-18	(Paul prays never to boast in anything except the cross of Christ)
St. Matthew 11:25–30	(Jesus is humble and gentle; in Him we find rest for our souls)

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Assisi is a village in the mountainous part of central Italy. Every pilgrim who visits there must make the short walk outside the city walls and spend time at the Church of San Damiano, one of the most important places in the Franciscan story. The most-often recounted event about this place is told to us by St. Francis’ biographer, Thomas of Celano:

“With his heart already completely changed—soon his body was also to be changed—[Francis] was walking one day by the church of San Damiano, which was abandoned by everyone and almost in ruins. *Led by the Spirit* he went in to pray and knelt ... devoutly before the crucifix. He was shaken by unusual experiences and discovered that he was different from when he had entered.

As soon as he had this feeling, there occurred something unheard of in previous ages: With the lips of the painting, the image of Christ crucified spoke to him. ‘Francis,’ it said, *calling him by name*, ‘go rebuild My house; as you see, it is all being destroyed.’

Francis was more than a little stunned, trembling, and stuttering like a man out of his senses. He prepared himself to obey and pulled himself together to carry out the command. He felt this mysterious change in himself, but he could not describe it. So it is better for us to remain silent about it too. From that time on, compassion for the Crucified [Christ] was impressed into his holy soul. And we honestly believe the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh.”<sup>1</sup>

Herein begins the mystery of the cross in Francis’ life. At first, he interpreted his experience in a literal manner, doing all he could to provide the means, using stones and mortar, to rebuild the physical structure of San Damiano, which actually *was* in ruins. Although this may have been part of the intent of the divine revelation, Francis quickly realized the rebuilding process needed to include the transformation of his heart, his inner self, and the “church” as the *people* of God—not a building. But first, Francis would have to renovate his inner self. For him, a simultaneous vocation unfolded: rebuilding the edifice *and* rebuilding his person. The process slowly unfolded as he gazed upon the image of the Crucified Savior over and over, time after time. But what were the steps?

St. Clare of Assisi, a companion of Francis, described it best in her “Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague,” when she wrote: “Gaze upon Christ, consider Christ, contemplate Christ, imitate Christ.”<sup>2</sup> For Francis, those four steps would become the pathway to a new heart and a new self.

Today, I would like us to focus on the last of St. Clare’s four directives: “imitate Christ,” which is the key to understanding both what happened to Francis at San Damiano, and how we can effectively rebuild our lives. It has been said that while St. Francis may be the best-known Christian saint, he is also the least imitated. The same could be said of Person of Jesus.

The verb “to *imitate*” is related to the word “image.” In the context of Francis’ experience before the cross at San Damiano, it means we *become* the image upon which, or whom, we gaze for any length of time. Some of you may be familiar with the old hymn that begins “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face.” Francis would learn that his self-image, that is, his true identity, was to become that of Christ on the cross.

The change that would take place within Francis' heart was formed by the image upon which *he* gazed. And this new self would become his tool for renewing the entire household of God, not simply a stone church in San Damiano. But why would simply continuing to gaze upon and meditate on the image of the Crucified Christ make such a difference?

The key is the Incarnation. Through the Second Person of the Trinity made flesh, God showed us His face—and character—in Jesus Christ. But what do *we* see in Christ's most Holy face? Francis and Clare saw humility, poverty, and charity. In Christ's Incarnation, Francis saw that God becoming human was the ultimate act of humility.

In embracing our humanity, as we read in Philippians, Chapter 2, Jesus did not “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (vv. 6-8). By choosing to empty Himself of His divine prerogative, Jesus could experience everything to which human nature is prone—grief, loneliness, rejection, pain, even death.

As it was for Jesus, humility for Francis meant not clinging to possessions, titles, honors, or position, all of which he—as the son of a prosperous merchant—both had and valued. In the huge conversion he underwent, Francis wholeheartedly accepted Jesus' teaching that we must be servants of all—and for him, that even meant the animals. It meant generosity of spirit and of heart, the willingness to let all others be first, and to take nothing personally. It meant obedience to all and being subject to all, as Jesus demonstrated when He—the Lord of the Universe—knelt on a dirty floor to wash His disciples' stinky feet.

In recognizing his true self in this image of humble servanthood, Francis understood that he needed nothing else to give him worth. The poverty—the emptying of self—that he saw in the Crucified Christ was the poverty of being a human creature: the poverty of being dependent, powerless, and helpless on our own. Jesus addressed this spiritual poverty, or our need for God, when He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Matthew 5:3).

The other virtue portrayed by Christ on the cross was charity, or all-compassionate love. Jesus' outstretched arms drew in all humanity, welcoming every person into the embrace of God's tender love through His mercy, forgiveness, and acceptance of all who would come to Him. For Francis, this meant recognizing and accepting the worth and dignity of every creature, person *and* animal—a truly revolutionary perspective in the Middle Ages!

We, like Francis and Clare, can find our true selves in the image of Christ crucified for us. If we sincerely internalize the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice for us, involving the profound love of God, and the greatest humility, we will be gradually transformed into the image of Jesus. In fact, it should be the life-goal of every Christian believer to become more and more Christlike, and therein, to become more loving, more humble, more compassionate, and more willing to serve others. As St. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:1-2: “be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God.”

For Francis and Clare, the cross was a mirror. It can be for us, too. Looking upon Christ crucified for us, if we can see ourselves in that as a mirror, we will begin to glimpse our authentic selves, the person God has always intended us to be.

And then, our distinguishing qualities will be the same as we see in Jesus: poverty, humility, and charity—the identifying characteristics of the very heart of God. Or, as St. Paul writes in Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” *That* is our goal. *That* was how Francis lived every day of his post-conversion life. He was so filled with Jesus, people who knew him felt as though they were in the presence of the Lord Himself. Perhaps that is why Francis later developed the stigmata, the five bleeding wounds of Christ, in his hands, feet, and side. Not to worry—as you seek to become more like Jesus, you're very unlikely to receive these. Only a few people in history, all canonized saints, have ever had that experience.

As we become more loving and more humble, this affects our relationships with friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, fellow church members, and the community at large. Francis' biographers pointed out that, when people met up with Francis or heard him preach, it was not simply a question of *listening to* words of peace and joy. Nor were people merely persuaded to reflect upon reasons to forgive one another, do penance, or thank and praise God. Rather, they directly *experienced* these gifts and virtues in the *person* of Francis. They were in the *living presence* of forgiveness, peace, faith, and love, because Francis had integrated these values into his whole person by wholly absorbing the image of Christ crucified.

As Thomas of Celano recorded: "The brothers who lived with him know that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips, sweet and pleasant conversations about Him, kind words full of love. Out of the fullness of his heart his mouth spoke. So the spring of radiant love that filled his heart within gushed forth. He was always with Jesus: Jesus in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, he bore Jesus always in his whole body.... With amazing love he bore *in his heart and always held onto Christ Jesus and Him crucified.*"<sup>3</sup>

Just as Francis heard Christ speak to him from the cross at San Damiano, what if we could hear Jesus *calling us by name*, from our crucifix at St. John's: "Nancy, James, Carrie, Kurt, Liz, Rick, Fran, Doug, Karen, Alex, Barry, Jen, Nina ... go rebuild my house; as you see, it is falling down in ruins." If you quiet your heart and mind, you may just hear the Lord speaking to you. And if so, may He give you the grace, courage, and strength to obey whatever He commands. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman, and William J. Short, eds. *Second Life*, #10, *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volume 2: The Founder* (New City Press, 2000) p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, Ignatius Brady, transl. *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (Paulist Press, 1982) p. 197

<sup>3</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volume 1: The Saint* (New City Press, 2002) pp. 283-284.

<sup>4</sup> Roch Niemier, "The Challenge of the San Damiano Cross," [FranciscanMedia.org](https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/the-challenge-of-the-san-damiano-cross), n.d., < <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/the-challenge-of-the-san-damiano-cross>> 29 September 2021. Used with permission.