

Saint Francis Discerns His Calling

In *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, written by Saint Bonaventure, there is a moment in Francis' life that he struggles to decide between devoting himself to a contemplative life of prayer or to the active life of preaching the Gospel.

“Now, it happened that he was once seized with great anguish of mind from a doubt as to what he ought to do, which, after spending many days in prayer, he laid before some of the brethren in whom he most confided: “Which, my brethren,” he said, “do you account most praiseworthy, which do you advise me to do — to give myself wholly to prayer, or to go about preaching the Gospel? For I, being a poor sinful man, and unskilled in preaching, have received the gift of prayer, rather than of speech. In prayer, again, is great gain and accumulation of graces; in preaching, the distribution of whatever gifts we have received from heaven. In prayer is the purification of the interior affections, and union with One True and Supreme God, together with an increase of all virtues. In preaching, the feet of the spiritual man are defiled with dust; therewith comes distraction concerning many things and great relaxation of discipline. In prayer we speak with God, and listen to Him, and, as if leading an angelic life, we converse with angels. But in preaching we must condescend to men in many things; and living among them as men, we must think, see, speak, and hear as men. On the other hand, this one thing would seem to outweigh all the rest before God, viz., that the Only Begotten Son of God, Who is the Supreme Wisdom, descended from the bosom of the Father for the salvation of souls, that He might teach the word by His example, and speak the word of salvation to men whom He redeemed with the price of His sacred Blood, washing them therewith in the laver of Baptism, and nourishing them therewith in the Chalice of Salvation, reserving to Himself nothing, but pouring forth all Liberally for our salvation. And therefore we ought to do according to the example of those things which we have seen in Him, as in a high mountain set forth before us, so that it seems to me more pleasing to God that I should lay aside my quiet, and go forth to labour.” (Saint Bonaventure, *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, ch. XII, pg. 111-113)

For many days Saint Francis pondered over the question, unable to find resolution. He sought only to fulfill the will of God, but could not decide how best to serve Him. Therefore he called two of his brethren and sent them to Brother Sylvester, “who once beheld a Cross issuing from his mouth, and who now devoted himself to prayer in a mountain near Assisi, beseeching him that he would inquire the Divine Will concerning this thing, and make it known to him from the Lord.” (pg. 113)

Francis also asked the same of the holy virgin Clare, and begged that she might ask some of the sisters to join her in prayer, that they might learn the Will of the Lord.

After a short time both Brother Sylvester and Clare and the sisters came back with a message in accordance; it was “to be the good pleasure of God that the servant of Christ should go forth and preach.” (pg. 113)

Francis, as soon as he heard the message, immediately girded himself, and without any delay, went forth on his way. “He hastened with such fervor to fulfill the divine command, as if the hand of God upon him had endued him with strength from on High.” (pg. 114)

It is beautiful that in a moment of doubt Francis turned to his brothers and sisters, to ask for their prayers to determine his direction, and that when he received their message in accordance, he did not delay, but in obedience set forth on the path

determined by God's Will. Now, at this stage of the story, as Francis travels to the first location where he is to preach, and there are a multitude of birds waiting for him on the way. This is the famous story of Saint Francis preaching to the birds, and the context of this famous scene I find to be as beautiful as the scene itself. This is the first sermon Francis delivers after the period of doubt and discernment, now filled with conviction and in alignment with the Will of God. I will copy the scene straight from Saint Bonaventure:

“When he drew near to Bevagna, he came to a place where a great multitude of birds of different kinds were assembled together, which, when they saw the holy man, came swiftly to the place, and saluted him as if they had the use of reason. They all turned towards him and welcomed him; those which were on the trees bowed their heads in an unaccustomed manner, and all looked earnestly at him, until he went to them and seriously admonished them to listen to the word of the Lord, saying: “Oh, my brother birds, you are bound greatly to praise your Creator, Who has clothed you with feathers, and given you wings wherewith to fly; Who has given you the pure air for your dwelling-place, and governs and cares for you without any care of your own.” While he spoke these and other such words to them, the birds rejoiced in a marvelous manner, swelling their throats, spreading their wings, opening their beaks, and looking at him with great attention. And he, with marvelous fervor of spirit, passing through the midst of them, covered them with his tunic, neither did any one of them move from his place until the man of God had made the sign of the Cross and dismissed them with his blessing, when they all at once flew away. And all these things were seen by his companions, who were waiting for him on the road. When this pure and simple man returned to them, he began to accuse himself of negligence, because he had never before preached to the birds.” (pg.114)

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