

Returning Every Good to the Lord: The Ascetic Exemplarity of Francis of Assisi

Krijn Pansters

Tilburg University, Franciscan Study Center

Abstract

According to hagiography, Francis of Assisi (†1226) was not only a charismatic follower of Christ, but also an exemplary ascetic with many followers who were also followers of Christ. In his transition from a worldly way of life to a “practice of strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline” and “austerity in appearance, manner, or attitude” (Merriam-Webster), we discern three basic elements of asceticism: order, openness, and struggle. Francis seeks some form of outer and inner order, without which his practice and his project will not succeed; he maintains an openness toward the Lord and his neighbors, without which his life would remain unordered and meaningless; and he is involved in a continuous and burdensome struggle, without which his goal cannot be fulfilled. Behind his practice of strict self-denial and austerity, as described by his hagiographers, we discern three of spirituality: giving back, goodness, and God. In all three elements of asceticism and in all three elements of spirituality, we see religious exemplarity at work: Francis becomes an exceptional example to the men and women around him.

Introduction*

Nine hundred years ago, Francis of Assisi went to Egypt to speak with the sultan Al-Kamil about Christ. For many centuries, this visit has been celebrated by many people all over the world as an early form of interreligious dialogue. No further information has come down to us about the event, and we have no way of knowing the participants’ motivations. But Francis surely intended to follow his own advice, found in chapter 16 of his rule, regarding those who go among the Saracenes: “As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among the Saracens and nonbelievers in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature (Tit 3:2; 2 Tim 2:14) for God’s sake (1 Pet 2:13)

and to acknowledge that they are Christians. The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that [unbelievers] may believe in almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, the Son, the Redeemer and Savior, and be baptized and become Christians.”¹ This peaceful approach contrasted sharply with that of the crusaders. Francis brought to the sultan a revolutionary Western practice of poverty, penance, and peace that aimed to transcend the boundaries of egotism, self-righteousness, and possessiveness, and that directed attention to the greater, common good – in this case, the peace and good of God. This episode took place several years after Francis converted, gave all his possessions to the poor, and started to imitate Christ (like many before him, East and West, who adopted an “apostolic lifestyle characterized by total material renunciation, homelessness, and begging”²). For the rest of his years, he practiced a way of life without power, prestige, or possessions, surrendering his superiority, pursuing humility and poverty (*minoritas*) in everything, and doing good for the sake of God.

Francis lived radically “without anything of his own” (*sine proprio*),³ and this life included techniques and disciplines. But in order to understand the poor Francis as a classic ascetic, we have to do two things.⁴ The first is to connect Francis to the ascetic tradition

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1 *The Earlier Rule* 16 (Regis J. Armstrong, et al., trans., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents 1. The Saint* [New York: New City Press, 1999], 63-86 [74]).

2 Daniel F. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), blurb. See also, for the European Middle Ages, Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

3 *The Earlier Rule* 1 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 63).

4 It is no surprise that there is only a meagre literature on historical Franciscan asceticism. Franciscan spirituality rather revolves around penance, peace, and mercy, which “were to become the watchwords of Franciscan preaching and to inspire concrete actions through which people could make amends for their faults” (André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. Michael F. Cusato [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012], 24). When Francis says at the beginning of his Testament that “the Lord

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that starts with Antony the Great and other desert fathers who inspired the Western Church. The second is to connect Francis to the hagiographical tradition that starts already before his death and that makes him into an ascetic *pur sang*. I will endeavor to do both in this article; first, however, a few words on Christian asceticism in general and its different theological and spiritual connotations. Asceticism (from the Greek *askesis*) means “practice.” The ascetic practices with perseverance and regularly in order to implement and perpetuate certain behaviors and skills.⁵ Whereas modern asceticism is not always related to a religious tradition,⁶ religious traditions throughout history have had both practitioners and critics of asceticism.⁷ The ultimate goal of Christian asceticism is salvation and sanctification, usually associated with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the inner life of the soul and with the incorporation into Christ through perfect devotion and virtue.⁸ The person who strives

gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance” (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 124), he means his conversion to “complete surrender to God’s will and becoming a “servant of God”” (Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi*, 58). See also Krijn Pansters, *Franciscan Virtue: Spiritual Growth and the Virtues in Franciscan Literature and Instruction of the Thirteenth Century*. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 161 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 152-157.

- 5 Corona Bamberg, *Askese: Faszination und Zumutung*. Spuren 2 (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2008), 9. See also: Krijn Pansters, “Vasthoudend en verdienstelijk voortgaan. Een kleine ethiek van de ascese,” *Franciscaans Leven* 98 (2015): 64-71.
- 6 See, e.g., Geoffrey G. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987); Axel Michaels, *Die Kunst des einfachen Lebens: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Askese* (München: C.H. Beck, 2004); Evert Peeters, et al., eds., *Beyond Pleasure: Cultures of Modern Asceticism* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011); Charles A. Riley II, *The Saints of Modern Art: The Ascetic Ideal in Contemporary Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Music, Dance, Literature, and Philosophy* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998).
- 7 See, e.g., Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Oliver Freiberger, ed., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Much of modern-day criticism is based on Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic* (German: *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift*, 1887).
- 8 See, e.g., Jan Bergman, et al., “Askese,” *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 4 (1979): 195-259; Jean Leclecq, et al., “Askese,” *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 1 (1980): 1112-1116; Annine E.G. Mantz-Van der Meer, *Op zoek naar loutering: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de enkratistische ascese tot in het begin van de dertiende eeuw n. Chr.* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1989); David F. Tinsley, *The Scourge and the Cross: Ascetic*

for these ultimate fruits (or who feels compelled to strive for them) may thus travel, in the words of Pseudo-Dionysius and other theologians, to perfection through stages of purification, illumination, and unification. Other terms found in ascetic and mystical theology and associated with the ascetic process are consolation, consolidation, effort, elevation, interiorization, merit, mortification, progression, temptation, and so forth. These and like notions clarify the process of what the French theologian Adolphe Tanquerey called “practical self-reform.”⁹

Like Christian asceticism itself, ascetic terms have become less important and have more or less ceased to be relevant in today’s world. There are a number of new interpretations of asceticism, however, that capture core meanings and essential elements of human striving and struggle in relation to modern-day existential problems.¹⁰ One such interpretation is given by the German philosopher and Benedictine sister Corona Bamberg, whose work is especially relevant for two reasons: her conception of asceticism as fascinating but confronting (*Faszination und Zumutung*), and her elemental as well as structural approach. Bamberg developed the following scheme of “twelve ascetic exercises”: judging without condemning (“Urteil ohne Richten”), shaping time (“gestaltete Zeit”), preparing the body (“der bereitete Leib”), loving as an art (“lieben als Kunst”), loving oneself without narcissism (“Selbstliebe ohne Narzissmus”), cultivating patience (“mit unerschöpfbarer Geduld”), being attentive (“gesammelte Gegenwart”), surrendering through prayer (“Gebet und Gottes Sieg”), passionate and pure longing (“Leidenschaft ohne Gier”), playing by the rules (“ernstes

Mentalities of the Later Middle Ages. Mediaevalia Groningana New Series 14 (Louvain: Peeters, 2010).

9 Adolphe Tanquerey, *Précis de théologie ascétique et mystique* (Paris: Desclée, 1924), Introduction. A Franciscan parallel is Léon Veuthey, *Itinerarium animae Franciscanum: Commentarium theologico-ascetico-mysticum* (Roma: Basilica SS. XII Apostolorum, 1938).

10 See, e.g., Archbishop Averky (Taushev), *The Struggle for Virtue: Asceticism in a Modern Secular Society* (New York: Holy Trinity Publications, 2014); Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000); Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008).

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Spiel”), dealing with boundaries (“Umgang mit Grenzen”), and preparing for death (“Einübung des Sterbens”). These areas of ascetic activity make asceticism, in the words of Bamberg, “much more than simply caring for oneself. One lets go in order to gain, one finds measure in immeasurable love, one dies in order to live.”¹¹

Alongside these twelve areas of asceticism, Bamberg also mentions three “structural elements” – exemplary notions that “give life the direction that it cannot find on its own.”¹² These are: order (“Ordnung”): “without outer and inner order, life will not succeed;”¹³ openness (“Offenheit”): “order without openness disregards life;”¹⁴ en struggle (“Kampf”): “the world is not in order but ultimately it is.”¹⁵

I will now use these three structural elements (order, openness, struggle) as a hermeneutical tool to read two classics of Christian hagiography: Saint Antony the Great and Saint Francis of Assisi.¹⁶ By analyzing the ascetic content of their *vita*, I will subject my own theological interpretation to some ascetic restriction, as these texts should speak for themselves as much as possible.¹⁷ In order to explain how asceticism serves the spiritual life and how ascetic elements function in the context of a certain religious program, one could also read religious rules such as the Rule of Benedict or the Rule of Saint Clare, or theological works such as Thomas Aquinas’ treatise on the virtues or David of Augsburg’s *Composition of the Interior and Exterior Man according to the Triple states of Beginners, Proficient, and Perfect*.¹⁸ Instead, I would like to draw attention to two

11 Bamberg, *Askese*, blurb (my translation).

12 Bamberg, *Askese*, blurb.

13 Bamberg, *Askese*, 21 (“Ohne äußere und innere Ordnung gibt es kein gelingendes Leben”).

14 Bamberg, *Askese*, 26 (“Ordnung ohne Offenheit zielt am Leben vorbei”).

15 Bamberg, *Askese*, 30 (“[...] der tiefste Impuls zur Ordnung [kommt] aus dem Glauben, dass die Wirklichkeit letztlich in Ordnung ist [...] Die Welt ist keineswegs in Ordnung”).

16 On the religious “classic,” see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 99-153.

17 See, in a different meaning: Nathan G. Jennings, *Theology as Ascetic Act: Disciplining Christian Discourse*. American University Studies. Series 7, Vol. 307 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

18 Raimondo M. Spiazzi, et al., eds., *S. Thomas Aquinatis Quaestiones disputatae 1* (Turin: Marietti, 1949); David ab Augusta, *De exterioris et interioris hominis*

of the greatest storytellers of Christianity: Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) and Thomas of Celano (d. 1260). The first wrote the *Life of Saint Antony* around 360;¹⁹ the second wrote the *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* around 1250.²⁰ Both accounts present an exemplary way of life as a means to reflect deeds and virtues. Whereas the first work introduces (as one of the first of its kind) many classical elements of Christian asceticism as building blocks of a “desert spirituality,” the second work transposes and transforms these elements into a new “mendicant spirituality,” a spirituality of beggary characterized by the virtues of “minority,” simplicity, and humility. What does this small selection of spiritual texts say about order, openness, and struggle as “the” structure of Christian asceticism? And what, furthermore, about their exemplary quality?²¹

- compositione secundum triplicem statum incipientium, proficientium et perfectorum libri tres* (Quaracchi: Claras Aquas, 1899).
- 19 Phillip Schaff & Henry Wace, *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series 2, Vol 4. *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 188-221. See <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/vita-antony.asp>. (consulted November 21, 2019).
- 20 Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 169-308. On the purpose of this work, Armstrong observes: “Shortly before the July 1228, canonization and shortly after Pope Gregory IX’s decree, Recolentes qualiter, of April 29, 1228, calling for a burial church to be built for Francis in Assisi, Gregory IX conferred upon Thomas the distinguished task of writing a life of the new saint. Thomas, it would seem, was to complement the architectural celebration of Francis with the composition of a new literary monument. Both contributions, requested by Gregory IX within months of each other, were to help preserve the memory of the life and example of the Poverello” (172).
- 21 See Krijn Pansters, *Spiritual Morality: The Religious Orders and the Virtues, 1050-1300* (Leuven: Unpublished PhD diss., 2019), 224: “The objective will be to relate Linda Zagzebski’s “exemplarist moral theory” to him and other primary figures in this movement, like Clare of Assisi and brother Leo, thus giving them their rightful place in a new and original theory that is “based on direct reference to exemplars of goodness.” (Zagzebski, 2017). The study of Francis and his companions as main features in exemplarist moral thought will illustrate how 1) “judgments about the identity of paradigmatically good persons” feature in our moral quest (Zagzebski, 2004), and 2) narratives and descriptions of this good person, in whom all theoretical concepts are rooted and whom we observe carefully, are “morally significant” (Zagzebski, 2017). See, therefore: Linda T. Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Linda T. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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Order

The ascetic life is an ordered life. It is said about the hermits in the time of Saint Antony, for example:

So their cells were in the mountains (Lk 16:9), like filled with holy bands of men who sang psalms, loved reading, fasted, prayed, rejoiced in the hope of things to come, laboured in alms-giving, and preserved love and harmony one with another. And truly it was possible, as it were, to behold a land set by itself, filled with piety and justice.²²

Several devout and “just” activities structured the course of the day, allowing the ascetic to spend more time on spiritual needs and only as much as absolutely necessary on physical needs.²³ The most important ordering element in the life of Antony appears to be prayer. Every prayer offers a new beginning, and with each new beginning his devotion and zeal are given a certain regularity and structure:

He at least gave no thought to the past, but day by day, as if he were at the beginning of his discipline, applied greater pains for advancement, often repeating to himself the saying of Paul: “Forgetting the things which are behind and stretching forward to the things which are before (Fil 3:13).” He was also mindful of the words spoken by the prophet Elias, “the Lord liveth before whose presence I stand to-day (1 Kgs 17:1; 18:15).” For he observed that in saying “today” the prophet did not compute the time that had gone by: but daily as though ever commencing he eagerly endeavoured to make himself fit to

22 Antony, 44 (*Select Writings*, 208).

23 Antony, 45 (*Select Writings*, 208): “And he used to say that it behoved a man to give all his time to his soul rather than his body, yet to grant a short space to the body through its necessities; but all the more earnestly to give up the whole remainder to the soul and seek its profit, that it might not be dragged down by the pleasures of the body, but, on the contrary, the body might be in subjection to the soul.”

appear before God, being pure in heart and ever ready to submit to His counsel, and to Him alone.²⁴

Daily prayer is part of his self-imposed disciplinary regime, in which he “applied greater pares for advancement” and “struggled the more daily to advance towards those things which were before (Fil 3:13).”²⁵ Ascetic ordering is thus required for persistent and unwavering progress.²⁶

For Francis, too, who was “unbending in his discipline” and “watchful of his guard at every hour” (Is 21:8), order also means daily devotional routine combined with the regular practice of virtue.²⁷ Especially in the early stages of his spiritual way, this means an almost mechanical alternation between going through the world (action) and withdrawing from it (contemplation). Already as a child, “he retired for a short time from the tumult and business of the world and was anxious to keep Jesus Christ in his inmost self.”²⁸ The man of God, says Thomas of Celano, “was accustomed to enter the cave, while his companion waited outside, and inspired by a new and extraordinary spirit he would pray to his Father in secret (Mat 6:6). He acted in such a way that no one would know what was happening within.”²⁹ The contrast between outside and inside correlates with the fundamental order in the “worldly vs. divine”- scheme, which he perceives and experiences in a radical way:

Now he wrestles naked with the naked.
After putting aside all that is of the world (1 Cor 7:33),
he is mindful only of divine justice.

24 *Antony*, 7 (*Select Writings*, 198).

25 *Antony*, 66 (*Select Writings*, 214).

26 See, e.g., *Antony*, 5 (*Select Writings*, 197): “But he, his mind filled with Christ and the nobility inspired by Him, and considering the spirituality of the soul, quenched the coal of the other’s deceit.”

27 *Francis*, 16 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 221). See also *Francis*, 17 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 223): “In this way holy simplicity filled them, innocence of life taught them, and purity of heart so possessed them that they were completely ignorant of duplicity of heart. For just as there was in them one faith, so there was one spirit, one will, one charity, continual unity of spirit, harmony in living, cultivation of virtues, agreement of minds, and piety in actions.”

28 *Francis*, 3 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 187).

29 *Francis*, 3 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 187).

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Now he is eager to despise his own life,
by setting aside all concern for it.
Thus
there might be peace for him,
a poor man on a hemmed-in path,
and only the wall of the flesh would separate him
from the vision of God.³⁰

In the end, it is love of poverty – finding consolation in indifference towards the world – and not love of asceticism – spiritual progress through ordered practice – which dictates the life of Francis and his brothers: “Only divine consolation delighted them, having put aside all their cares (1 Pet 5:7) about earthly things. They decided and resolved that even if buffeted by tribulations and driven by temptations they would not withdraw from its embrace (Eccl 3:5).”³¹

Openness

Asceticism presupposes self-improvement and self-elevation toward the highest good, but these are preceded by being fully susceptible, a state founded on an otherworldly focus and grounded in a complete openness toward God: “not I but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10), in the words of Antony’s biographer Athanasius.³² Antony, warning against the power of the devil and demons, therefore preaches: “[...] let us be courageous and rejoice always, believing that we are safe. Let us consider in our soul that the Lord is with us (Matt 1:23), who put the evil spirits to flight and broke their power (1 Cor. 2:6). Let us consider and lay to heart that while the Lord is with us, our foes can do us no hurt.”³³ This openness toward

30 *Francis*, 6 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 194). See also: *Francis*, 16 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 187): “That is why the uproar outside did not seize his ears, nor could any cry intrude, interrupting the great enterprise he had in hand.”

31 *Francis*, 6 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 214).

32 *Antony*, 14 (*Select Writings*, 197): “[...] so that all who truly fight can say, ‘not I but the grace of God which was with me.’”

33 *Antony*, 42 (*Select Writings*, 207): “[...] but rather let us be courageous and rejoice always, believing that we are safe. Let us consider in our soul that the Lord is with us, who put the evil spirits to flight and broke their power. Let us consider and lay to heart that while the Lord is with us, our foes can do us no hurt. [...] But if they see us rejoicing in the Lord, contemplating the bliss of the

God – the main elements of which seem to be joy, courage, and trust – may also be translated into more open social relationships that build on sympathy as well as self-reflection, namely, an openness toward one’s own shortcomings:

Wherefore committing the judgment to Him, let us have sympathy one with another. Let us bear each other’s burdens (Gal 6:2): but let us examine our own selves and hasten to fill up that in which we are lacking.³⁴

Consequently, as joy comes with zeal, consolation comes with mutual faith:

And again there was joy in the mountains, zeal for improvement and consolation through their mutual faith (Rom 1:12).³⁵

Ascetic openness thus includes the kindness and mildness characteristic of a courageous self-improver. This person loves the Word of God and he loves his neighbor. Like Antony, he “subjects himself in sincerity to good men” and “learns thoroughly where each surpasses him in zeal and discipline,” observing them, taking knowledge of their virtues, and taking note of their mutual love.³⁶

In the same way, the converted Francis opens himself up for God’s guidance: “He prayed with all his heart that the eternal and true

future, mindful of the Lord, deeming all things in His hand, and that no evil spirit has any strength against the Christian, nor any power at all over any one – when they behold the soul fortified with these thoughts – they are discomfited and turned backwards.”

34 Antony, 55 (*Select Writings*, 211).

35 Antony, 54 (*Select Writings*, 210).

36 Antony, 4 (*Select Writings*, 196): “He subjected himself in sincerity to the good men whom he visited, and learned thoroughly where each surpassed him in zeal and discipline. He observed the graciousness of one; the unceasing prayer of another; he took knowledge of another’s freedom from anger and another’s loving-kindness; he gave heed to one as he watched, to another as he studied; one he admired for his endurance, another for his fasting and sleeping on the ground; the meekness of one and the long-suffering of another he watched with care, while he took note of the piety towards Christ and the mutual love which animated all.”

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God guide his way and teach him to do His will (Ps 143:10).”³⁷ On the one hand, divine answers and signs of God’s presence give him great joy: “The Lord showed him what he must do. He was filled with such great joy (Ps 126:2) that [he failed] to restrain himself in the face of his happiness.”³⁸ On the other hand, his joyful openness paves the way for swift action: “The holy father, overflowing with joy (2 Cor 7:4), hastened to implement the words of salvation, and did not delay before he devoutly began to put into effect what he heard.”³⁹ Joyful is his experience of God’s grace in prayer:

Gradually, an indescribable joy and tremendous sweetness began
to well up deep in his heart.
He began to lose himself;
his feelings were pressed together;
and that darkness disappeared
which fear of sin had gathered in his heart.
Certainty of the forgiveness of all his sins poured in,
and the assurance of being revived in grace was given to him.
Then he was caught up above himself and totally engulfed in
light,
and, with his inmost soul opened wide,
he clearly saw the future.
As that sweetness and light withdrew,
renewed in spirit,
he now seemed to be changed into another man (1 Sam 10:6; Ps
51:12).⁴⁰

The increasingly open-minded Francis finds equal joy in the struggle and harm inflicted upon him: “Throughout these many struggles, he began to exhibit a more joyful appearance. From the injuries inflicted he received a more confident spirit and, now free to go anywhere, he moved about with even greater heart.”⁴¹ Francis even exposes himself

37 *Francis*, 3 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 187).

38 *Francis*, 3 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 188).

39 *Francis*, 9 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 202).

40 *Francis*, 11 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 205).

41 *Francis*, 6 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 193).

to insult and wrongdoing, bearing them – like physical ailments – with patience and a peaceful heart.⁴²

Struggle

Antony's asceticism, a "difficult discipline" and a "labor of virtue," takes the form of a struggle with the devil, who:

tried to lead him away from the discipline, whispering to him the remembrance of his wealth, care for his sister, claims of kindred, love of money, love of glory, the various pleasures of the table and the other relaxations of life, and at last the difficulty of virtue and the labour of it.⁴³

Then:

at length putting his trust in the weapons which are 'in the navel of his belly' (Job 40:16) and boasting in them – for they are his first snare for the young – he attacked the young man, disturbing him by night and harassing him by day, so that even the onlookers saw the struggle which was going on between them. The one would suggest foul thoughts and the other counter them with prayers: the one fire him with lush the other, as one who seemed to blush, fortify his body with faith, prayers, and fasting. And the devil, unhappy wight, one night even took upon him the shape of a woman and imitated all her acts simply to beguile Antony.⁴⁴

The devil seduces the saint with several of the classical sins – in this case, the vices of greed and lust. The ascetic ignores the spiritual attacks and, instead, continues steadfastly on the path of prayer and

42 *Francis*, 5 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 191): "But since the patient person is better than the proud, God's servant showed himself deaf to all of them, and neither broken nor changed by any wrong to himself he gave thanks to God for all of them"; *Francis*, 16 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 220): "Yet there was no complaining about this, no grumbling; but with peaceful heart, the soul filled with joy preserved the virtue of patience."

43 *Antony*, 5 (*Select Writings*, 196-197).

44 *Antony*, 5 (*Select Writings*, 197).

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abstinence.⁴⁵ The Lord now shows himself to be a witness to the struggle, and he speaks in support of the besieged:

Antony, I was here, but I waited to see thy fight; wherefore since thou hast endured, and hast not been worsted, I will ever be a succour to thee, and will make thy name known everywhere.⁴⁶

In persecution (under the emperor Maximinus), Antony “stood fearlessly, shewing the readiness of us Christians.”⁴⁷ He also “prayed himself to be a martyr.”⁴⁸ Apart from the fight with demons and persecutors, there was the contest with other ascetics. In the words of Athanasius to the addressees of his *vita* (namely, “the monks in foreign parts”): “You have entered upon a noble rivalry with the monks of Egypt by your determination either to equal or surpass them in your training in the way of virtue.”⁴⁹

Francis also fights with the devil: “He used to struggle hand to hand (Ez 21:24) with the devil who, in those [solitary] places, would not only assault him internally with temptations but also frighten him externally with ruin and undermining.” As a brave soldier of Christ, he undertakes a spiritual battle: “After fortifying himself with the sign of the holy cross, he arose”; “He rose, therefore, swift, energetic and eager, carrying the shield of faith (Eph 6:16) for the Lord, and strengthened with the armor of great confidence, he set out for the city [and openly exposed himself to the curses of his persecutors].”⁵⁰

45 *Antony*, 7 (*Select Writings*, 197): “But Antony having learned from the Scriptures that the devices of the devil are many, zealously continued the discipline, reckoning that though the devil had not been able to deceive his heart by bodily pleasure, he would endeavour to ensnare him by other means. For the demon loves sin. Wherefore more and more he repressed the body and kept it in subjection, lest haply having conquered on one side, he should be dragged down on the other.”

46 *Antony*, 10 (*Select Writings*, 199).

47 *Antony*, 46 (*Select Writings*, 208).

48 *Antony*, 46 (*Select Writings*, 208).

49 *Antony*, Prol. (*Select Writings*, 195).

50 *Francis*, 27 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 244); *Francis*, 4 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 188): “[...] and when his horse was made ready, he mounted it”; *Francis*, 5 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 191).

Together with his brothers, he also continues the battle against the hostilities of the body:

Whenever their moderation was upset, as normally happens, by too much food or drink, or if they went over the line of necessity because of weariness from travel, they punished themselves severely with many days of fasting. They strove to restrain the burning of the flesh by such harsh treatment that they did not hesitate to strip themselves on freezing ice, and to cover themselves in blood from gashing their bodies with sharp thorns.⁵¹

In addition to his struggles with the flesh (his attempt to put his sinful nature to death) and with the self (his zeal for self-deprivation and self-contempt), in later years Francis also struggled with illness: “His body began to be afflicted with different kinds of illness, and more severe than usual. Since he had over many years chastised his body and brought it into subjection (Rom 15:23; 1 Cor 9:27), he suffered infirmities often.”⁵² This, however, was no longer a real battle but rather a victory, because “repeated submission became spontaneous, as the flesh, yielding each day, reached a place of great virtue, for habit often becomes nature.”⁵³

Actual Asceticism

Many elements of traditional Christian asceticism no longer resonate with the modern-day zeitgeist. One aspect that has become problematic nowadays, for example, is the idea of prolonged

51 *Francis*, 15 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 220). See also *Francis*, 16 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 221): “For if, as happens, any temptation of the flesh struck him, he would immerse himself in a ditch filled in winter with ice, remaining in it until every seduction of the flesh went away”; *Francis*, 27 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 243): “He made himself insensible to all outside noise, gathering his external senses into his inner being and checking the impetus of his spirit, he emptied himself for God alone.”

52 *Francis*, 2,4 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 266). See also *Francis*, 19 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 228): “He often did things in this way both to despise himself fully and to invite others to everlasting honors. [...] A true scorner of himself, he taught others to despise themselves by word and example.”

53 *Francis*, 2,4 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 266).

physical seclusion: Antony “descended as into a shrine, and abode within by himself, never going forth nor looking at any one who came;”⁵⁴ Francis “went to a place of prayer, as he so often did;”⁵⁵ and so forth. So, too, has the idea of prolonged physical deprivation: Antony “more and more repressed the body and kept it in subjection (1Cor 9:27);” he “ate once a day, after sunset, sometimes once in two days, and often even in four”; for the most part he “lay upon the bare ground;”⁵⁶ in a similar spirit, Francis “made for himself a tunic showing the image of the cross, so that in it he would drive off every fantasy of the demons. He made it very rough, so that in it he might crucify the flesh with its vices and sins (Gal 5:24).”⁵⁷

Other remarks appear more relevant to today’s world: Antony “had the same habit of body as before, and was neither fat, like a man without exercise;”⁵⁸ he “was altogether even as being guided by reason, and abiding in a natural state”⁵⁹; and he “marvelled at the quantity [of gold], but passed it by as though he were going over fire.”⁶⁰ Further traditional ideas of enduring value include “progress in virtue [...] by desire and fixity of purpose”⁶¹; “to speak no further and to say nothing from my own promptings”⁶²; and “to prefer the love of Christ before all that is in the world.”⁶³ These statements are likely to be of worth in a highly individualized society which often calls, paradoxically, for general measures and collective solutions. An actual contemporary asceticism could learn from traditional asceticism, first, that moral and spiritual “improvement” starts with the individual; in this, the ascetic follows Antony, who “confirmed his purpose [...] to keep all his desire and energy for perfecting his

54 Antony, 12 (*Select Writings*, 199).

55 Francis, 11 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 205). See also Francis, 27 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 244): “That is why he often chose solitary places to focus his heart entirely on God. [...] For his safest haven was prayer; not prayer of a fleeting moment, empty and proud, but prayer that was prolonged, full of devotion, peaceful in humility.”

56 Antony, 7 (*Select Writings*, 197-198).

57 Francis, 9 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 202).

58 Antony, 14 (*Select Writings*, 200).

59 Antony, 14 (*Select Writings*, 200).

60 Antony, 12 (*Select Writings*, 199).

61 Antony, 7 (*Select Writings*, 198).

62 Antony, 39 (*Select Writings*, 206).

63 Antony, 14 (*Select Writings*, 200).

discipline.” More importantly, second, improvement is made possible through the imitation of more perfect individuals. “After he had seen this man,” it is said about Antony, he “imitated him in piety”; and: “henceforth [he] would strive to unite the qualities of each, and was eager to show in himself the virtues of all.”⁶⁴ As Francis strove to imitate Christ and the apostles, many from the early thirteenth century onward also strove to imitate Francis, of whom it is said:

How handsome, how splendid!
How gloriously he appeared (2 Sam 6:22)
in innocence of life,
in simplicity of words,
in purity of heart,
in love of God,
in fraternal charity,
in enthusiastic obedience,
in agreeable compliance,
in angelic appearance (Jgs 13:6).
Friendly in behavior,
serene in nature,
affable in speech,
generous in encouragement,
faithful in commitment (Prov 11:13),
prudent in advice,
efficient in endeavor,
he was gracious in everything (Est 2:15)!
Tranquil in mind,
pleasant in disposition,
sober in spirit (2 Tim 1:7),
lifted in contemplation,
tireless in prayer,
he was fervent in everything!
Firm in purpose,
consistent in virtue,
persevering in grace,
he was the same in everything!

64 Antony, 3-4 (*Select Writings*, 196).

The Ascetic Exemplarity of Francis of Assisi

Swift to forgive (Jas 1:19),
slow to grow angry,
free in nature,
remarkable in memory,
subtle in discussing (Wis 7:22-23),
careful in choices,
he was simple in everything!
Strict with himself,
kind with others,
he was discerning in everything!⁶⁵

In this mirror of virtues, in which the saint is portrayed as an ethical-ascetic model, we encounter our three ascetic structural elements of order, openness, and struggle (as suggested by Bamberg). In his watchfulness and prayerfulness, his daily devotional routine, and his regular practice of virtue, this “ascetic” “knows that he is put in an order that does not depend on him” and *orders* himself in his new way of life (“Nur weil sich der Mensch in eine unabhängig von ihm bestehende Ordnung der Dinge gestellt weiß, kann er sich bemühen, sich selbst und sein Leben zu ordnen [...]”).⁶⁶ In the innocence of his life and in the purity of his heart, “he surrenders a piece of his willfulness” and *opens up* to the people and things around him (“Immer geht es darum, freiwillig ein Stück Eigenmächtigkeit fortzugeben in das Offene und Ungesicherte hinein [...]”).⁶⁷ Finally, in his strictness toward himself and in the determination of his action, “he breaks thought the vicious circle of I-involvement” by way of a tenacious and meritorious *struggle* (“Dem hielt der Teufelskreis der Ichbezogenheit nur selten stand”).⁶⁸

Conclusion: Returning Every Good to the Lord

Francis did not want to become pure and perfect; rather, he wanted to follow in the footsteps of Christ and become Christ-like – nothing more and nothing less. The accounts of his extreme asceticism are

65 Francis, 29 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 252-253).

66 Bamberg, *Askese*, 22.

67 Bamberg, *Askese*, 30.

68 Bamberg, *Askese*, 35.

hagiographical. The *vitae* of Antony and Francis are not historically accurate. They are, however, *ascetically* and *ethically* accurate, expressing a real worldview in traditional terminology.⁶⁹ Like the authors, we, too, encounter an *exemplary asceticism* in these sources, which may serve as a contemporary source of inspiration. Most compelling to me remains Francis' readiness throughout to "return every good to the Lord"⁷⁰ – a phrase taken from his own *Admonitions* that may best capture his spiritual, Christological program of complete "practical self-reform" by "living without anything of his own," always, everywhere, continuously, eternally.

69 With regard to this, Armstrong observes: "Designed to appeal to the rich tradition of holiness manifested in the lives of the saints, it reaches beyond the particular interests of Francis's followers to inspire men and women everywhere. Therefore, Thomas situates the saint, Francis, within the ancient Christian tradition and brings the freshness of his example into the life of the Church" (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 175).

70 *Admonition* 18 (Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi*, 134).