

THE FATHERLY BLESSING

It was like a blank space that was almost filled up, with the next one to come not yet visible. Francis could not stop thinking about the extra ration the priest slipped him. If this were his path, then he would have to have a priest beside him his whole life supplying him with food. Francis remembered the leper. Actually, what he really wanted was to share the life of the poor, and now although he did slave away and was thoroughly beat and tired every evening, he was still provided with food by a well-meaning priest and even given an additional ration. This could not be all there was. Despite the determination to follow his path, Francis stood time and again before choices, before crossroads, which were not yet marked. But he kept on going.

It was poverty that had led him to the reconstruction of San Damiano. The extra ration stood in sharp contrast to the leper he had embraced. The knight of Christ reminded himself of his bride, Lady Poverty. As much as he toiled inside the walls of San Damiano, this was not the life of the poor he had chosen. So how did the poor live?

The answer was his directive: Go from door to door with a bowl in your hand and put the scraps you are given into it. The embrace of the leper was the start. What now followed was no less terrible and cost no less will power for Francis. He made up his mind to beg and journeyed up to Assisi with a bowl in his hand. This had nothing to do with his earlier attempt at begging in Rome, as now he had made up his mind to eat what was given to him. Now it was serious. Francis trudged up to town and entered the city gates, filled with what must have been some

hesitation and much strength of inner will. More was involved than the unappetizing question of what he would eat this evening. The bourgeois son of a merchant entered his hometown for the first time as a beggar.

Francis wanted to live a life of poverty by choice, out of love to the one who was born poor, who lived poor and who died naked on the cross. This was, however, not a slogan in a high school yearbook or a romantic social inspiration following a moving Sunday homily. What Francis planned to do he put into action in a moment and what he said he meant literally. So he stood there with his twenty-five years, in a gray hermit's habit in the streets of Assisi and proceeded, with a bowl in his hand, to beg door to door for something to eat. The people who knew how pampered a life he had led previously were astonished when they saw him take various scraps in the same bowl with such little regard for himself.

But the second part of the exercise was still to come. When he wanted to eat the mishmash of food, he was repulsed and his throat tightened up. In the past he had not even been able to look at something like that. Francis began to eat, slowly and with great self-control. Then what had occurred before happened again. It was again like the time he had embraced the leper. Not one bite stuck in his throat, he no longer gagged—it worked. A thankful happiness overcame him, and it now seemed as if he had a bowl full of delicacies before him. A transformation took place again. And what had been bitter now became sweet.

During these days his father entered the plan for the last time. His beloved son standing in the street like this, gaunt and emaciated, freezing from the cold, the gray rags hanging from his thin shoulders, in his hand a bowl with the whole town's weekly menu . . . he could not take it anymore. Shame and sympathy

filled him with pain. He was not even able to avoid him now, for he was continually turning up around every corner. Pietro di Bernardone could no longer stand to see Francis. And one day the father cursed his son.

Many who had at first laughed at the beggar now stopped in their tracks and became silent; they were more than a little shocked when they saw how patiently he took it. But then Francis adopted a new father. He called to a simple man among the bystanders and said, *When you see how my father curses me, I say to you, bless me, father! And you will bless me in his place.* After the man had blessed him as he wished, Francis said to Pietro di Bernardone, *Don't you believe that God can give me a father who blesses me against your curse?*

***Francis:** This event was very important for me. It would have been better if my father and I had not seen each other again for a long time. My appearance was a continual provocation for him. I can understand well that he could no longer stand the sight of me. It hurt him in his innermost father's soul. When people from town ridiculed or laughed at me, it was easy for me to disregard it. But when my father cursed me it stopped being easy. That cut me deeply. It was the hardest scene between us because it was truly a curse and I needed a blessing.*

On this day it was no longer enough to say, Our Father, who art in heaven. I felt naked inside, lonely and almost lost. The last time it was a leave-taking with strength, but this time I felt helpless. It was as if I inwardly fell to my knees. My eyes fell upon an older man in the crowd who looked at me with astonishment, but

also with kindness in his eyes. Then I knew what I needed—not reassurance, but a blessing. And I needed his blessing.

I was convinced that I was on the right path. It was not desperation that tortured me at this moment. All of a sudden I felt no strength inside me. It was as if there wasn't anyone standing behind me anymore. It was a spontaneous inspiration that led me to take this substitute father and get his blessing. And suddenly it was there again. I stood up straight once more, again full of vitality and the knowledge of what needed to be done. It was almost arrogant how I said this to my father's face. One moment I was on the ground and the next I was bursting with power.

Take this fatherly blessing for yourselves sometime. If you don't want to ask your own father for it, then look for another older man. Sometimes we don't only need advice but a blessing. Maybe something's been on your mind for a long time and inwardly you've already made a decision. You know it's the right thing to do, so this isn't what's bothering you. It just seems that something's missing. Your decision doesn't have strength yet, and you're still hesitating for one reason or another. Go to your fatherly man and tell him what you're planning. If he then says, Do it!, then you are able to sense what you still needed. This can be the missing part that bestows a blessing on your plan. What you are planning becomes a directive and the blessing gives you extra power.

WITHOUT FEAR OF FLYING

At this time Francis not only renovated San Damiano but also the church of San Pietro della Spina, which no longer exists today, and the chapel of the Portiuncula. He had forbidden the priest to give him any more extra rations. He could support himself and get the materials he needed for the renovation of the churches by doing whatever occasional work he could find and by begging. Somehow his persistent manner, which refused to abandon the pursuit of his objectives, was infectious. Again and again he found residents of the town who supported him at his construction sites. He returned to the places where he had celebrated festivals with them and begged for oil from the troubadours in French, so the lights in San Damiano could burn continually.

This passage of life, which as yet did not have a clear goal at its end, had already taken four years. Francis was not just an instant saint who came out of a can of godly revelations. His transformation was much more a long, sometimes bright, sometimes dark path, a process that led him through many stations where he knew highs and lows, sometimes secure in the knowledge of what to do and sometimes following his course without a clue. Francis set off when he did not yet know how his journey should continue, when he did not yet have an idea what its goal would be. But he set off. He followed an inner calling that was only a voice in the fog at first, but he let himself be called. He attempted and experimented, including the ridiculous scene where he masqueraded as a beggar in front of the Church of St. Peter. He still had a long way to go when he was just beginning

to take on responsibility for himself, for his dream and soon for his first fellow brother.

Maybe it was more feelings of uncertainty that led him to renovate the other two chapels. It must have already been clear to him that he would not go down in history as an untrained restorer of chapels. At that time he could scarcely even have imagined his very different contribution to the restoration of the church. Francis was a man who thought in concrete terms and the instructions he had previously received before the crucifix in San Damiano comprised a concrete directive. At some point, when he was climbing around on the stonework he surely would have asked himself if this was all, and what was going to come next—but only sometimes, for he had a lot to do.

Francis was a bundle of energy and possessed a deep inner strength, but it was still unclear what form his life would take. So much inside him was in movement. He knew the essentials, but a concrete model was still missing. There were his dreams and the image of the Crucified One, there was the restorer, the beggar and the knight of poverty, but there was no rhyme or reason to it. The frame was missing to complete the picture. The thread running through these years, from one chapel to the next, from one task to another, leading ahead to the future, was missing. Again this time it was hardly an accident when at the beginning of 1208, at the age of twenty-six, he went again to San Damiano and heard the Gospel during Mass. Francis now needed something concrete.

Jesus' sending out of his disciples was a concrete gospel if there ever was one: *The kingdom of heaven is at hand . . . do not take gold or silver or copper in your belts. Do not take a sack for your journey, or a second tunic or sandals, or walking stick. For whoever works deserves his keep. . . . When you enter*

a house say first, Peace be with this house! If you are invited inside the house, stay there and eat and drink what you are offered. Was it really this easy? Or had he missed something? After Mass Francis went to the priest and questioned him. Is that really written there and is it supposed to be understood that way? Yes, it's really written there, and that was how it was to be understood. Francis was a practical man. He did not need philosophical interpretations but clear guidance for a solid directive. This quote was as clear and concrete as he needed. It seemed that they had both been waiting for each other. This was exactly what he wanted! An indescribable happiness filled him when he said this aloud. The priest read the Gospel to him again and in a short time he knew the passage by heart. He kept it in his memory the rest of his life.

Now he had what he had been searching for so long: a clear directive that extended beyond the next construction site. On this day and in this Gospel his long years of striving and searching found their final model—and a definitive one at that. It was no less than Christ's directive to his disciples that gave Francis his own directive for life. In the sending-out of the disciples he recognized his calling. The giver of instructions was in both cases the same. This is something Francis attached great importance to his entire life. His directive did not come from the church, from a priest or anyone else. His directive, and he repeated this in his *Testament*, came from the Lord. Even if Francis was not a church rebel, he changed much just by the way he lived and thus the great importance he attached to this point becomes understandable. Despite all of his loyalty to the church there was never any question in his mind that he had received his instructions directly from God.

These were considerable footsteps he was walking in, and he

was never one to lack self-confidence. He followed in the apostles' footsteps so that we would remember them. He followed in these footsteps to remind us that Christ does not provide his disciples with only comfortable house slippers, and that Christian faith loses its strength when it is watered down to become a trimming of middle-class prosperity, when it was always thought of as something much more radical. Just to make it perfectly clear: certainly no person was more able to do this than Francis. He did not beat around the bush but immediately put his directive into action. In his mind, interpretation or analysis was useless.

Without hesitating he cast off everything—he got rid of his shoes, staff and sack, and exchanged the hermit's habit for a rough, unsightly robe. So as not even to be tempted to take anything with him, he threw away the belt and fastened his robe with a rope instead. He avoided every possession from that time on and scorned coins like the plague. More than once he ground them into the dirt with his foot, saying that was the only way to deal with such a temptation from the devil. Now he was finally free.

Francis: I also felt free, free as a bird that could fly because a burden had been lifted from him—free and light. Now you'll probably think I'm completely crazy, but that's the way it was and that's the way it is. That's how it is with the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field. It was an incredible feeling, and yet at the same time I felt like I was standing on absolutely solid ground. It was reality.

That's easy for him to say, I hear you saying. And you aren't completely wrong. Up to that point I hadn't had any responsibility for other people. But just the same, if you can't fly it also has to do with you. You cling to so

much of what makes you unfree and isn't even necessary. How many of you aren't satisfied with what fulfills your needs? It always has to be more and more, always better, faster, more fantastic, and what the other person has, you need, too, but even bigger. Just try to figure out the time that a lot of men spend slaving for status symbols. Your worries grow bigger with the more you pile up, and what's supposed to make your life easier actually only makes it more complicated. At the same time you become tired inside, old, feeble and too weary to fly. Life has passed you by and you didn't even notice it.

I never expected that all people should live like me. Later I even forbade my brothers to speak badly of those who didn't live like we did. Even more the questions are whether or not you can still feel life, whether or not you are happy, and whether, at least sometimes, you can still fly.