

# Can Franciscans Be Angry Francis of Assisi and the Trap of a Mono-Emotional Saint<sup>1</sup>

By Darleen Pryds

We know that Jesus got angry. He overturned tables of the money changers in the temple and exclaimed, "...You are making [this temple] a den of robbers." (Mtt.21:12-13) An easy internet search will produce dozens of images of a scowling Jesus toppling over tables and thrashing alarmed money changers. We apparently allow Jesus a range of emotions, but that range becomes sharply reduced for our favorite saints, especially Francis of Assisi.

When searching images of Francis, it quickly becomes apparent that the most common artistic depictions of the saint show him with animals, often gently stroking birds. He is also frequently shown in ecstasy, exulting in God's creation as he reveals the imprint of Christ's wounds on him. One could readily assume from these images that Francis was ever gentle, ever receptive, ever calm. And yet many passages from the early hagiography of the saint reveal that he lived with passion and expressed a wide range of emotions including anger. Rather than being persistently placid, Francis also expressed joy that was grounded in suffering, dissatisfaction that was voiced in sarcasm, and disappointment that was expressed as anger. A Francis who lived with passion and expressed a range of emotions is a complex Francis that may be difficult to embrace.

Many of us prefer to bypass that complexity in favor of birdbaths and statues of a gentle Francis (even though we may contradict that preference by protesting commercial versions of a sanitized and sentimentalized holy man from Assisi). It is easier to love a mono-emotional saint especially when that emotion is peacefulness. Clearly, that's an image we prefer to experience when we ourselves have unresolved issues and underdeveloped psychological mechanisms for working with

our discomfort with a full range of emotions. We have projected our own restricted psychologies onto Francis so that we can limit the behavior of those around us by charging, "That's not being very Franciscan!" when others emote in ways that offend or challenge our own sensitive natures.

Yet we shortchange the founder of this tradition and we shortchange ourselves and each other in the tradition when we think that Francis was only a peace-loving flower child. The early hagiographers who documented his life and nurtured the early cult of believers with their narratives of him, portrayed Francis in a breadth of emotional states including anger. In these early texts we may be surprised to find instead of a mono-emotional hyper-sensitive charisma, a rich and natural range of emotional expressions from grief to sadness, from nostalgia to pining regret, from uncontrolled exuberance to anger. Yes, even anger. This essay explores a brief overview of how Francis' emotional range has been depicted in modern popular film portrayals and juxtaposes those with medieval hagiographic depictions of Francis in an effort to bring forward the spiritual lessons to be gained from accepting this emotional range while also pointing out the spiritual numbness that results when this range is stultified.

One of the most commonly accepted images of Francis comes from Franco Zeffirelli's classic movie, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*.<sup>2</sup> Filmed and produced at the height of the Flower Child movement in 1972, this movie shows only the young Francis high on God at the very beginning of his religious conversion. Like a young man in love for the first time, this Francis expresses a giddy joy as he marvels at the beauty of nature and is filled with innocent wonder at letting go of parental and societal expectations to live an unencumbered life embracing God's love. While dismissed as overly sentimental by some viewers, Zeffirelli captures that first ecstatic stage of youthful conversion. The film only follows Francis' life up to 1209 with Pope Innocent's approval of the order, so it remains a portrait of a young convert before the tests of life, the trials of leadership, and the physical effects of zealous austerities.

<sup>1</sup> This essay started as a 45-minute lecture originally given at the Franciscan School of Theology in Oceanside, California as part of its Franciscan Vision Series. It grew to a two-hour seminar offered at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona and then became a five-hour day of reflection for the Spring Gathering of Affiliates of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. This is a first and brief attempt to distribute in text some of the fruits from those public talks. What is presented here is a short summary of the material that is available. I have chosen in this essay to focus only on Francis although there is abundant material especially concerning lay Franciscans and their emotional range. I am grateful to all these organizations and to the audiences who offered enthusiastic feedback and requests for more material on the topic.

<sup>2</sup> *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, (1972).

In 1989 when the film industry was creating gritty portrayals of faith, such as Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*, Liliana Cavani offered a complicated view of Francis that presumed to be based on the companions' stories and memories of the saint's life. Her film, *Francesco*, portrays Francis over a broad arc of his life, from his early conversions to the last years of his life when he was racked with doubt, physical ailments and psychological depression.<sup>3</sup> She depicts a Francis who is complex even in the early stages of his conversions when both youthful giddiness and psychologically troubled public gestures are shown. The fruits of this complexity slowly reveal themselves in the film when Francis' late-life despair and grief provides the ground for Cavani's depiction of Francis' spiritual joy having taken root and grown into an intricate and multifaceted faith that was anything but one-dimensional. The film is less well known and is shown far less at Franciscan retreat centers and parishes in large part because it shows a spirituality that is complex and includes unsentimental, even puzzling and uncomfortable aspects of the saint.

A quick comparison of how Zeffirelli and Cavani depict the scene of Francis' renunciation in front of the bishop may suffice here to illustrate the different voice and tone of these directors and the respective impressions they offer of the saint. Zeffirelli depicts a somewhat dazed and humble Francis patiently and reverently answering the bishop's questions when he arrives in the

town square for his public renunciation of his father's wealth. The music swells as he strips his clothes in front of a crowd that stands in awe and admiration. Cavani sets the same scene in an ecclesial court room, also with a Francis who is dazed but juxtaposed to a lawyer endeavoring to plead his case with logic and reason. The jarring music points to the psychological break that Francis is experiencing. The grand gesture of removing his clothes is met with ridicule, embarrassment, and shame

by the public who is there in the courtroom witnessing the spectacle. The scene is uncomfortable to watch, but for the viewer who is willing to stay with the discomfort here and throughout the film, the reward is a new appreciation of a complex Francis. Cavani dares to portray a Francis whose faith troubled him and provoked in him a range of emotions from happiness to sadness, from resistance to acceptance, from despair to joy. There is a gravitas to the joy that Cavani portrays. It is a joy that is not giddy or lighthearted, but one that emerges over a life of trials, mistakes, a range of emotions, and, of course, faith.

These are both film interpretations adapted for modern audiences based on a mélange of medieval sources. What do the original sources reveal about Francis? Across the hagiographic tradition from the first decades after Francis died, we see confirmation of all these modern depictions which means that Francis himself was seen as a complex, multifaceted figure by his contemporaries, even those who were promoting his reputation for saintliness.



<sup>3</sup> *Francesco*, dir. Liliana Cavani, (1989).

The *Legend of the Three Companions* confirms the depiction of the young Francis as giddy and happy in the early stages of his conversion. For example, enamored by his ideas of the life of a knight, Francis set off “with great joy” on a journey to Apulia to be knighted. “He was even more cheerful than usual, prompting many people to wonder.” When asked about his outlook, “he was beaming with joy, [and] answered” “I know I will become a great prince.” But arriving only as far as Spoleto, he became ill and when falling asleep he heard someone ask about his plans and then prod him with the question, “Who can do more good for you? The Lord or the servant?...why are you abandoning the lord for the servant?” Francis considered all this and “quickly” returned to Assisi, “buoyant and happy,” and ready to follow God’s call for him. (*The Legend of the Three Companions*, *FAED*, II, pp. 70-1)

A lighthearted sense of joy is also found in Thomas of Celano’s depiction of Francis in *The Remembrance of the Desire of the Soul*. Here we find the bit of charming animal-whisperer tendencies of Francis that most of us like so much. In chapter 130, Francis calls to a cricket and sings to her: “My Sister Cricket, come to me!” And the cricket, as if it had reason, immediately climbed onto his hand. He said to it: “Sing, my sister cricket, and with joyful song praise the Lord your Creator!” The cricket obeying without delay, began to chirp, and did not stop singing until the man of God, mixing his own songs with its praise, told it to return to its usual place” (*FAED*, II, 357). Certainly, this Francis must be gentle in movement and peaceful in demeanor to attract a cricket to sing with him.

But Francis was not always depicted as so cheerful or even happy-go-lucky. He also experienced a sense of personal shame upon meeting someone poorer than he. In *The Assisi Compilation* (*FAED*, II, p. 220), Francis was out and about on a preaching tour when he encountered a destitute man. “This man’s poverty brings great shame on us; it passes judgement on our poverty,” he said to his companion. “How so, brother?” the companion replied. “I am greatly ashamed when I find someone poorer than myself. I chose holy poverty as my Lady, my delight, and my riches of spirit and body. And the whole world has heard the news, that I professed poverty before God and people. Therefore, I ought to be ashamed when I come upon someone poorer than myself.” Perhaps influenced by some amount of spiritual pride, Francis felt he and his brothers should not be “shown up” by anyone in an even greater state of poverty as they. Because of his encounter with the pauper, Francis experienced personal embarrassment and humilia-

tion. Interestingly, there is no mention of compassion or suffering with the poor man.

Perhaps nothing brought out the fullest range of emotions that revealed Francis’ disapproval as his fellow friars. He experienced sadness, especially when he heard of his brothers behaving in ways that were bad examples (*FAED* II, *Assisi Compilation*, p. 219). He “detested those in the Order” who wore more clothing than necessary or who wore soft cloth for their comfort. [*FAED*, II *Assisi Compilation*, p. 137]. Around any sense of luxury or ease of the brothers, Francis’ emotions became even more volatile. He wanted his brothers to live in poor dwellings, and to stay in them only as pilgrims, rather than owners. He was said to “hate” all pretense in the houses and “abhorred” any fine furnishings. He “detested” and “despised” money and expected the brothers to treat it with similar disdain [*FAED* II, *Assisi Compilation*, pp., 135-7.] Even when his emotions are not directly stated, one may surmise from his actions a level of discontent, judgement, and possible anger. For example, Francis returned from traveling and found that the brothers had built a house complete with tile roof without his consent. The only expression of emotion that is given is “he was amazed.” But Francis is said to have considered the situation and the possible influence this would have on others. He climbed up to the roof and ordered the brothers to do as well, then began throwing the tiles down to the ground. It is possible, I suppose, although unlikely, to imagine Francis in this scene as placid and gentle. But even if we can imagine him in a state as something other than fuming with anger, the volatile act of throwing tiles to the ground where they crashed and broke evokes the indignation he felt and it symbolizes his own disappointment and broken heart over the actions of the brothers. (*FAED*, II, *Assisi Compilation*, p. 157)

Late in Francis’ life, these emotional expressions took an even sharper focus toward his brothers. After having resigned as minister general—a step that no doubt provoked a range of emotions in itself—and during a period of illness, which of course is no one’s best state for equanimity, Francis is said to have lashed out in anger over the behavior of the friars. When asked by a friar how he could resign from office, he responded, “Son, I love the brothers as I can, but if they would follow my footsteps I would surely love them more and would not make myself a stranger to them. For there are some among the prelates who draw them in a different direction, placing before them the examples of the ancients and paying little attention to my warnings. But what they are doing will be seen in the end.”

Obviously stewing over this conversation, while sick in bed, he raised himself up in bed in an angry spirit: ‘Who are these people? They have snatched out of my hands my religion and that of the brothers. If I go to the general chapter, then I’ll show them what my will is!’ So angry is Francis at the leaders of the order, he cries out “Who are these people?” He doesn’t even recognize them as men he had received as friars. His anger bubbles up from the sheer disappointment he feels in them. His anger changes into deep sadness when he is asked if he will change the provincial ministers who have abused their power. Sobbing and feeling the defeat of someone who has lost everything he lived for and created, he said, “Let them live any way they want, for there is less harm in the damnation of a few than in the damnation of the many.” [FAED, II, Celano, *Remembrance of the Desire of the Soul*, 366-7) Anger, disappointment, sadness, and incredulity: these emotions are tangled up together in Francis’s response to friars who do not live up to his expectations.

Nothing else provoked in Francis intense emotions like his deep disappointment in the brothers when they shirked the fullness of their vows. And when Francis expressed his frustration and anger, the brothers didn’t always know what to do. For example, when Francis was rewriting the *Rule*, word had circulated that Francis intended to intensify the rigors of their religious disciplines. Various ministers of the order tried to get Elias to talk to Francis about it. “We want you to go to him and tell him that we refuse to be bound to that *Rule*. Let him make it for himself and not for us.” (FAED, II *Assisi Compilation*, pp. 131-132 at 131). Elias told them that he didn’t want to do that, since he “feared the rebuke of Brother Francis.” They ended up going together to plead their case.

Elias introduced the ministers to Francis, “These are the ministers...who hear that you are making a new rule. They fear that you are making it very harsh, and they say, and say publicly, that they refuse to be bound by it. Make it for yourself and not for them.” In clear annoyance and frustration, Francis turned his eyes to heaven and engaged in conversation with Christ, “Lord, didn’t I tell you they wouldn’t believe you?” Christ responded that whatever stipulations were in the Rule had come from Him and He wanted the Rule to be followed to the letter without interpretations. “Those who refuse to observe it should leave the Order.”

Almost as if taunting the ministers, Francis turned to them as said, “Did you hear? Did you hear? Do you want me to have you told again?” The ministers are said to have left the scene “confused and blaming them-

selves.” So, we see in this incident a rather awkward response to the expression of anger and frustration. The ministers did not dare to engage further with Francis. The emotions (and the purported authority of Jesus backing Francis’s claims) put an abrupt end to the scene but clearly it did not end the thoughts or feelings of the ministers.

In the very next scene, at the general chapter, known as the Chapter of the Mats, 5,000 brothers convened with the Cardinal Protector, Hugolino, who later became Pope Gregory IX. Some of the brothers tried to get the cardinal to intervene on their behalf over their concern with the harshness of Francis’ *Rule*. They hoped the cardinal could successfully advocate on their behalf so that another, previously written *Rule*, that of Benedict or Augustine could be applied to them. Having listened to the cardinal make this argument, Francis escorted him to the front of the assembly and announced that God had called him to “the way of simplicity” and not to any other Rule. He warned that God would confound the learned among them for making claims for the use of another *Rule*. “...I trust in the Lord’s police that through them He will publish you, and you will return to your state, to your blame, like it or not. The cardinal was shocked and said nothing, and all the brothers were afraid.” (FAED, II, *Assisi Compilation*, pp. 132-3.)

Where is the gentle and kind Francis here? The simplicity that Francis lived by and argued for his brothers was not sentimental or syrupy. It was grounded in clarity of intention and focus of discipline. When simplicity of living—what we would call today as minimalism--was abandoned, Francis could be stern, direct, frustrated, sarcastic, and yes, even angry.

What does this list of emotions and means of communication reveal about Francis? One could flippantly say that Francis was moody. But I think his emotional range more accurately reveals the expansive capacity of love that Francis had. He loved Christ so much; he loved the Christ-given way of simplicity and poverty so much; he loved his brothers so much, that he could not bear to see any breach in any of these relationships. For Francis’ spirituality was not individualistic; it was relational. We misinterpret Franciscan spirituality when we think relationships do not endure disagreements, disappointments, and the expression of anger.

While medieval companions of Francis were stunned by his expressions of these challenging emotions, modern authors offer insight into difficult emotions that are in keeping with the relational quality of Franciscan spirituality.

Beverly Harrison points to the role of anger in relationships: Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring. To put the point another way: anger is—and it always is—a sign of some resistance in ourselves to the moral quality of the social relations in which we are immersed. Extreme and intense anger signals a deep reaction to the action upon us or toward others to whom we are related.<sup>4</sup>

To say that someone who expressed anger is not “being Franciscan” or simplistically to reject anger, frustration, or even sarcasm as “not Franciscan” is to stifle the complete range of emotional expression that Francis himself offered and that has been recorded by his contemporaries. Stifling the expression of anger or other emotions limits the depth of relationships between any two people and even risks the danger of causing psychological harm when converting one’s own discomfort with someone else’s expression of anger into a disciplinary step. Francis himself unapologetically experienced and expressed a wide range of human emotions. Perhaps it is time to embrace this full emotional range in the images we use to depict Francis and in the lives we lead as his followers.

### Reflection Questions:

1. Do you experience anger? How do you feel when you experience anger? Do you feel you can express your anger? Or do you feel like you need to suppress and repress anger?
2. How do you respond when others around you express anger? Do you try to get away? Do you try to suppress their emotions? Do you react with anger of your own?
3. Have you ever noticed other emotions in play when anger is expressed? For example, have you ever noticed disappointment? Fear?
4. What kinds of situations evoke anger in you? Feeling disrespected? Feeling disenfranchised or not included? Feeling treated unfairly? Experiencing injustice? Notice the patterns so you can pray through them, not to suppress them, but to understand them and learn from them.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1980-81, supplement), 49 as cited by Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is. The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 257.



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