



A LIGHT OF THE FRANCISCAN ORDER: St. Anthony of Padua

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Probably the most widely read book on Christian perfection, next to the Bible itself, is *The Imitation of Christ* by Father Thomas á Kempis. It has been a guide for both saints and converted sinners. The spirituality of this book has at its source a love for the God-man - Our Lord Jesus Christ. It enters into a deep conversation between Christ and the Christian soul, where One guides and the other seeks guidance. The reader comes to understand that to truly imitate Christ he must learn to take up his cross, that is, the struggles and temptations of life, and follow Him.

For any disciple to truly learn from a master he must have obedience, and more than that, unquestioned obedience. It is easier for man to obey a master who intimidates him, and who appears to be superior in every respect. The usual motive for such obedience is fear. Even though Christ is superior to us in all things and could easily have appeared intimidating He chose instead to give us the example of meekness, humility, and obedience. It is easy to see the connection between *The Imitation of Christ* and Franciscan spirituality. For both have at their core the simple truth: ***the imitator of Christ must learn to love Christ poor; Christ despised; Christ suffering; and Christ crucified.*** In short, we must first follow Christ towards the sufferings of Mount Calvary before enjoying the bliss and joy of Mount Thabor. Understanding the Franciscan element it is then not surprising that when the identity of the book's author was uncertain that a Franciscan should have been suspected. This was St. Anthony of Padua.

St. Anthony was not born in Padua nor was he even Italian, but rather he was born in Lisbon, Portugal on August 15, 1195, and baptized with the name Fernando de Bouillon. He was from a noble family, but that earthly status did not match the nobility of his soul. So, it was not surprising that he eventually joined the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, who had a monastery in Lisbon, and was ordained a priest. He was later transferred to the monastery of Santa Cruz. He requested the transfer because the frequent visits from family and friends were a spiritual distraction. Now at Santa Cruz, away from the distractions, he could peacefully continue his life of study, prayer, and penance. This quiet life was not to last, for God would soon call his servant to the active apostolate of the Friars Minor.

It is not certain what exactly inspired Fernando to become a Franciscan. It was probably, as it usually is, a mixture of things. He may have been inspired when the bodies of the first Franciscan Martyrs came up from Morocco through Portugal, for he did desire martyrdom. He also may have been inspired by the friars who lived near the monastery, for he was in frequent contact with them. Nevertheless, he became a Franciscan and took the name Anthony, after St. Anthony of the Desert, the patron of that small friary.

There is a very simple principle that if properly understood can grant to a soul a certain amount of peace, that is, - *if you do not get what you want - do not complain, be content, and accept it as God's Will.* St. Anthony desired the martyr's crown; he did not receive it. He desired then to live the life of a simple brother in obscurity, but God had other designs. God wanted St. Anthony to be "a city on the top of the mountain," "a light on the lamp stand," a mover of hearts, a herald of truth, and the "Hammer of Heretics." He was destined to be a preacher!

The office of preacher never crossed St. Anthony's mind! He wanted to hide his great memory for Sacred Scripture and his erudite intellect. He accomplished this to such an extent that he was viewed by his brothers as a simpleton and useful for very little. This is why the provincial of Bologna, Father Gratian, was hesitant to accept this young friar into his province. It was more out of necessity than pity, that he recruited Anthony to be the

chaplain for a small group of hermit lay-brothers. All of this begs the question: why did St. Anthony wish to hide his God-given intellect? He did this not out of fear or selfish pride, like the servant who buried his talent in a handkerchief, (*St. Luke 19: 20-21*) but rather it was out of humility. In his humility, he sought to use his talent to grow closer to God in solitude. Now that which comes from humility is from God! God was merely preparing His servant for his future vocation, and it was He who set the time that this light would shine upon the souls of men. He did this through a simple act of obedience.

In Ember Week – March 19, 1222, Father Gratian took his young simple priest to Forli, Italy where they attended an ordination of candidates to Holy Orders from both Friars Minor and Friars Preacher. Father Gratian had been requested to give a sermon in honor of this occasion by the bishop of the province. Father Gratian offered this honor to the Sons of St. Benedict, but since none were prepared they refused. So Father Gratian turned to his young friend, whom he suspected was much wiser than his humility would admit, and asked him to preach. St. Anthony quickly asked to be excused due to his inexperience and lack of intellect. Father Gratian would hear nothing of this and ordered St. Anthony under “holy obedience” to give the sermon, using as his subject the Scripture passage: “*Christ became for us obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.*” (*Philippians 2:8*) This Anthony did humbly without question and preached such a sermon that he appeared to all to have a deep knowledge into all things spiritual. Thus, began Anthony’s vocation as a preacher.

Let us now return to the book, *The Imitation of Christ*. Here is what this inspired author writes concerning the importance and benefit of obedience: “*It is a very great thing to obey, to live under a superior and not to be one’s own master, for it is much safer to be subject than it is to command. Many live-in obedience more from necessity than from love. Such become discontented and dejected on the slightest pretext; they will never gain peace of mind unless they subject themselves wholeheartedly for the love of God.*”

Go where you may, you will find no rest except in humble obedience to the rule of authority. Dreams of happiness expected from change and different places have deceived many.

Everyone, it is true, wishes to do as he pleases and is attracted to those who agree with him. But if God is among us, we must at times give up our opinions for the blessings of peace.

Furthermore, who is so wise that he can have full knowledge of everything? Do not trust too much in your own opinions but be willing to listen to those of others. If, though your own be good, you accept another’s opinion for love of God, you will gain much more merit; for I have often heard that it is safer to listen to advice and take it than to give it. It may happen, too, that while one’s own opinion may be good, refusal to agree with others when reason and occasion demand it, is a sign of pride and obstinacy.”

We can take from this text two principles that are necessary for proper discernment of God’s Holy Will. First, if it is a sin, clearly against the Commandments of God and the Church, then it is not God’s Will. Second, if your superior commands you to do something, even if it is a small task, then you know that is God’s Will for you at that moment. The first principle applies to everyone – whether a priest, religious or a layman. The second principle is directed mainly towards religious as a daily practice! It may, though, be practiced by the laity, such as following the guidance of one’s confessor.

How do these two principles of obedience apply to Franciscans in today’s modern world? I used a Latin phrase to explain poverty, so I will do the same with obedience. It is *nihil mutavit*, which means “nothing has changed”! That’s why they are principles – they never change! The Rule of our Blessed Father St. Francis commands that we obey our superiors in all things that are not sinful and not against our conscience or the Rule. Obedience is an easy thing, when we are asked to do something we like or, at least, agree with. Obedience instantly becomes unbearable when we are asked to do something that is displeasing to us. A Friar who practices true obedience does not try to figure out the reasons why Father Guardian commanded him to do something. He does not waste his time judging whether or not he thinks it is beneficial or wise. The goal is unquestioned humble obedience and a readiness to perform any task! St. Anthony sought to be obedient throughout his entire life, and it was because he did it with a humble spirit, he is now elevated with the Seraphs in heaven!

“O, St. Anthony, the second light of the Franciscan Order! Pray for us, your children! So that we may practice humble obedience and perfect charity. May we use the gifts that God has given us for His greater honor and glory. May we consider what we have so far accomplished as nothing and continually strive to grow in wisdom and holiness! Amen.”