

November 2007

The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com
Phone: 312-372-5111, Ext. 338 ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

GETTING TO THE TRUTH

The story of how Francis of Assisi uncovered the deception of a “false saint” must have been very popular, for nearly all of the earliest writers, from Thomas of Celano to Bonaventure, have some version of it. The *Legend of Perugia* gives the longest and most detailed account of the incident, and what follows here is taken from that source.

There was a friar who lived a holy and even exemplary life. Day and night he gave himself over to prayer, and he kept a silence so strict that when he went to confession, as he did from time to time, he did not speak out loud, but used signs and gestures instead of words. Anyone could see how devout and fervent his love for God was; words were not needed. When he sat with the friars, although he never spoke he listened eagerly to their holy conversation, and was so lit up with inward and outward joy that he inspired devotion in the friars and in anyone else who saw him. All looked on him as a saint.

He had already lived many years in this manner of life when Francis came to visit the friary where he stayed. After a few days of watching him and hearing about him, Francis had made up his mind, and said to the other brothers in the house, “You should know truly that this is a deception and a trick of the devil, and the proof of this is that he doesn’t want to confess.” Faced with the choice of believing Francis or believing their own eyes, the other friars nodded respectfully, but continued to regard the man as a saint.

Some weeks later the minister general of the Order – Francis had long since resigned that position – also came to that same friary, and in the presence of Francis he began to praise the

friar whom everyone regarded as a saint. Francis would have none of it. He said, “Believe me, my brother, that man is deceived and is led by an evil spirit.” The minister general replied, “I cannot believe that any man in whom we see so many signs and works of holiness could be what you say he is.” “Put it to the test,” answered Francis, “and order him that from now on he must go to confession twice a week, or at least once a week. If he doesn’t obey you, then you’ll know that the truth is just what I’ve told you.”

Some days later the minister general was alone with the friar in question, and he used the opportunity to say to him, “My brother, it is my firm will that you begin to go to confession twice a week, or at least once a week.” The friar placed a finger over his lips and shook his head, using gestures to let the minister general know that he would not do it, and that instead he would maintain his practice of strict silence. The minister general, for his part, did not insist on this any more, for fear that the friar would take offense.

Within just a few days, the friar abandoned the Order and returned to the world, taking up again the life and clothing of a layman. No one saw him again for quite a while, and then one day two companions of Francis met him on the road. He was walking alone, like the poorest pilgrim or vagrant. Moved with pity, they said to him, “You poor guy! Where is the pious and holy life you used to live? You never wanted to reveal yourself to your brothers or to speak to them, loving instead your life of solitude. And now you make your way through the world like a man who knows neither God nor his servants.”

Now he began to speak to them, swearing up and down like the worst of those in the world. The friars answered him, "You're a disgrace. Why do you act this way? In your former life, when you were in the Order, you kept yourself from speaking not only useless words, but also good ones." The ex-friar retorted, "It cannot be otherwise." And they went their own ways. A few days later, the friars heard the news that the man had died. The story concludes with the note that the friars and others who heard of this deed could see by it the holiness of Francis, who had been able to foresee this man's fall even at the time when everyone else, including the friars who lived with him, took him for a saint.

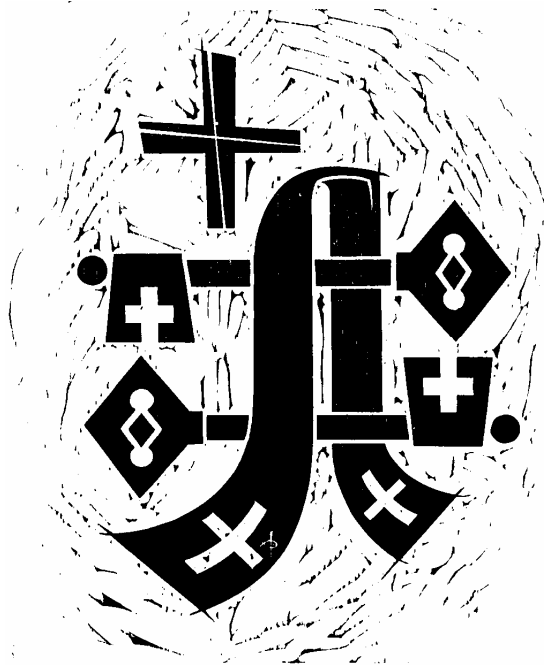
Everyone loves a good mystery, and we could turn this story into a minor mystery by asking just how Francis had been able to see through this friar that everyone thought was a genuinely holy man. The *Legend of Perugia* writer emphasizes that this was not an easy thing to do when he tells us that the friar was thought to be authentic not just by strangers and those who only visited the friary, but by his own brothers who were living with him. It is one thing, and not perhaps too difficult a thing, to make a favorable impression on people that you don't see that often or have to spend a lot of time with. But this man made a favorable impression, the best impression, on precisely the people that he spent the most time with. He lived with those other friars, and not just for a short while but for many years. They saw him day in and day out, and this over a long period of time, and they were thoroughly convinced that he was a holy man. They arrived at this conclusion not because of anything he said – he maintained the strictest silence imaginable – but because of the way he lived his life. This was not a boastful

man who tried to convince others with high-sounding and beautiful words. He never spoke at all, and his brothers formed their opinion of him from his "signs" and his "works," and these never indicated anything other than holiness and goodness. In the end, the man was unmasked as a hypocrite, but why was his hypocrisy so successful for so long, and what had tipped off Francis as to the truth?

The story points us to the clue that became the key for Francis: confession. The friar did not avoid the sacrament altogether. He did go to confession from time to time, but he kept to his self-imposed silence and never spoke a word to his confessor. Instead, he indicated his sins by "signs and gestures." Which means what? He

did not use writing, and he seems to have been illiterate. And in 1220 they were still centuries away from the development of what we know as "sign language," a true and complete language that the deaf can use to communicate any thought or expression that can be put into words and spoken. The man's signs and gestures, of his own devising and invention, must have been severely limited as to their expressive power. George Bernard Shaw, in a conversation on the uniqueness and range of human

language, noted that "No matter how eloquently a dog wags his tail, he cannot tell you that his father was poor but honest." This man was not deaf or mute, but he limited himself to a set of signs that would have been a bit better than the wagging of a dog's tail, but only a bit. What kind of confession could those have been? Not, we suspect, ones in which the friar could get into much detail or could tell the whole story. And he did this not because he had to, but because he wanted to. He and he alone was the builder of a situation in which his confessions could be little more than the beating of his



breast as an indication of his sorrow for his sins, sins that he very much kept to himself and would not even consider confessing to the priest. And it worked – his confessors, no less than his confreres, were convinced of the man’s authenticity and holiness.

How could this friar deceive so many for so long? Francis points to how this was achieved by describing the man as “deceived.” He did not call him “deceitful” or “deceiving,” even though he was, but rather “deceived.” The man was so good at deceiving others because at some point along the way of deception that lasted many years he had succeeded in deceiving himself. It wasn’t just that other people believed the lie about him; he believed it, he had become the first, best victim of his own hypocrisy.

John Henry Newman, in one of his sermons, shrewdly points out that it is not in us to deceive others for very long without deceiving ourselves as well. At the beginning, we probably know, or at least suspect the truth about ourselves, and unwilling either to live with that truth or to work to change it, we start to put on a false front, making our lives a bit easier by helping others to arrive at a false assessment of us. This false front is not entirely a lie – it is, usually, what we would like to be – but it is very far from the truth. Little by little, as it becomes clear that others are buying our little imposture, we move from knowing or suspecting that it is not true, to thinking that it could well be true, to believing that it is more true than false, and if we keep at it long enough, it will become our considered judgment that, after all, it really is true, we are at heart and in reality what we have all along pretended to be. And because nobody contradicts us, at least not to our face, we can live on in this illusion, this false consciousness, for years and years, just like the friar in the story.

Newman’s understanding of the nature of hypocrisy thus ran much deeper than the popular notion of that vice. We usually think that the hypocrite fools others for personal profit or to gain influence, all the while knowing the truth about himself. Newman’s view, at once subtle and obvious, is that most hypocrites are quite unaware of what they really are. They began to

deceive others precisely so that they could end up deceiving themselves. Their goal all along, unspoken and unconscious, especially to themselves, is to arrive at the point where the truth about themselves is hidden from themselves. If I am a bad man, and if I can convince you, a good person, that I am a good man, and if you are in fact convinced of this and begin to act on this conviction, to treat me and to talk to me as if I really were a good man, then your positive judgment and treatment of me become pieces of evidence, proofs that I can use to establish, to myself, that I am good. The self-deception that Francis recognized in this friar was not some unintended side effect of his behavior – it was, from first to last, in a mechanism that is truly diabolical, the goal of the whole operation.

And now we can finally understand why Francis’ only suggestion to the minister general was that this friar be ordered to start to go to confession once or twice every week, and by this he meant real confession, in the normal way, speaking as he was quite capable of speaking, and dropping the “signs and gestures” that he had used as a screen behind which he could hide his sins, even from himself. With words, he could tell the truth, the whole truth, about his sins and himself. Lying in confession is one of the worst sacrileges a person can commit, as would have been clear even to this friar whose conscience had been hardened by many years of successful hypocrisy. Although a full and complete confession would have been painful for him, it was not Francis’ intention to cause him hurt or be cruel to him. Acting in all love, Francis was urging the minister general to prescribe the only remedy that could save the man – the cold bath of reality that comes with knowing that you must speak honestly what is in you and what you have done. The minister tried to do this, but when he saw how offended the friar was, he backed off, acting out of a thoroughly ill-conceived and misplaced spirit of kindness. Such softness, such kindness was not what the friar needed. Francis, who comes across as harsh and unyielding, knew better than anyone what ailed this man and what would cure him.

—*Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.*



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*