

A COIN AND A KISS

St Francis and Social Justice

Jane Kopas

AN IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC of Roman Catholicism is the place it gives to saints. Throughout the history of the Church, saints have been viewed as intercessors and exemplars. As an exemplar of the Christian life, there are few saints who have the universal appeal of St Francis of Assisi. Whether people are inspired by his simplicity, his role as a peacemaker or his love of animals, Francis strikes a chord in the hearts of many. Of late he has been espoused as an example for those who seek social justice.

But a more careful look at Francis's situation in the chaotic Middle Ages might lead us to reconsider whether he fits the model of someone who promotes social justice. We might wonder if it is even fair to expect him to have challenged the social conditions preventing poor and marginalised groups from gaining greater equality and respect before there was a philosophy to make injustice visible as such.

The liberation theologian Leonardo Boff says that, if we look carefully, we have to say that Francis did not have what we would identify as a concern for social justice issues.¹ That is, he did not engage with changing social structures or challenge anyone to oppose anything. Francis did not identify problems and set out to remedy them. He was a medieval man who lived in a world which did not think of social injustice as a problem to be solved by rational means. If we want to reveal what he has to offer those who seek social justice today, we have to approach the topic differently.

Francis lived 800 years ago, in a historical context very different from ours. He could not envision our possibilities for addressing the plight of those who suffer poverty, violence, illness or discrimination. He could

¹ Leonardo Boff, *Francis of Assisi: A Model for Human Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), 80–85.

not provide an analysis of the social conditions that his age had to face, because people of his time did not have the tools for such analysis. We have to look instead at his concerns and his vision on their own terms.

To grasp his contribution, it is important first to explore some basic elements of the age in which he lived in order to put his life into its historical context. Then it is useful to consider the sources available to understand the way he operated in that context. Building on those sources, we can become aware of his primary concerns and the way he responded to them. Only then will his real contribution be apparent, and we will find that, even without a modern social justice agenda, he has something specific and special to offer those who want to respond to social injustices today.

Life in the Thirteenth Century

Francis lived in the early thirteenth century, when institutions in his society were undergoing significant changes. The old, feudal order was dying, and a new one was emerging. As Thomas Gannon and George Traub put it, ‘The basic framework of society, medieval feudalism, was breaking apart and being replaced by a new phenomenon—the medieval city’.² Life was moving away from the feudal manor, where commerce was hardly known and money was barely used, to urban centres where merchants and artisans held the keys to the economy. The agricultural setting of feudal society was giving way to the communal urban setting of a merchant economy. Here there were new possibilities for making one’s place in the world through individual effort.

Francis’s father was part of this emerging commercial world, and Francis himself was at home in it in his youth, but as he came of age he found himself an outsider in both the feudal and the mercantile worlds. He was not attracted to the settled feudal society, nor to the promise of success in the family business. He willingly sought a way of life which would make and keep him marginal. He immersed himself in a gospel form of life that led him to live in the world without being a part of its value system.

His world was undergoing religious as well as economic and political change. If people felt that the ecclesial hierarchy and monastic spirituality

² Thomas Gannon and George Traub, *The Desert and the City: An Interpretation of the History of Christian Spirituality* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 82.



were not meeting their emerging spiritual needs, where were they to turn? New groups sprang up seeking the greater simplicity of the way of life described in the Gospels, a new and relevant form of preaching, and laity-based organizations. The desire for a new form of religious life was a likely outcome of changes in society. The time was ripe for new visionaries to appear, and they did appear, pre-eminently in the form of Francis himself and Dominic de Guzmán, founder of the Dominicans. But they were not the only ones inspired to meet the spiritual needs of the people.

Various small groups arose that were seeking a more gospel-centred life. Waldensians, Albigensians and Humiliati looked to express a religious way of life that was not tied to the old monastic form, even stressing lay membership. They did not seek conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities, but eventually found themselves in that position. A number of them were declared heretical. Francis did not end up in conflict with authority, perhaps because of his gift for peacemaking as well as his abiding respect for the priesthood. He was too involved in living the joy of the gospel, and with individuals, to take on the systemic ills of the Church.

Amid the economic and religious ferment, a range of social issues needed a response—poverty related to the new economic order, illnesses such as leprosy that had a powerful social impact, and both large-scale and local violence, among others. There were no analytical tools to assess conditions or provide strategies for dealing with social injustice. But such analysis would not have replaced the gifts that Francis brought to these issues. In the emerging culture there was neither room nor imagination

***Immediate
needs, not ...
causes and
effects***

to envision solutions to broad social problems, but there was something more basic, and deeper. Francis was concerned with individuals within that world, not with why things were as they were. He was concerned with immediate needs, not with causes and effects. This kept him focused on the dignity and priorities of those around him. We can best see how this worked by looking at accounts by his closest associates. They will give us a sense of what is unique about Francis and his contribution to our work for justice today.

Resources for the Life of Francis

The basic information we have about the life of Francis comes first from three classic accounts. They are the first and second lives of Francis by Thomas of Celano and the major life by St Bonaventure. None of these early writings provide the perspective we look for in a modern biography. The main kind of writing about saints at the time was hagiography, and it followed a standard pattern—a time of conversion, a subsequent life of asceticism and virtue, and miracles attributed to the person's holiness. Many of the things we would look for in a biography today are missing. We find no factual observations about Francis's historical context or his family life, and no information about his schooling or siblings. These works do not contain a clear picture of society's attitudes towards the various groups of people he encountered, and above all they include few of the stories that reveal his unique personality. Whatever does not fit into the accepted framework for the life of a saint is neglected.

Thomas of Celano wrote the first life of Francis in 1228, four years after Francis's death. He wrote a second life almost twenty years later, expanding the first with new information he gleaned from other friars. Around 1263, Bonaventure completed his own account of the saint's life at the request of the general chapter of the Franciscan order. There were two reasons for this new version. First, a proliferation of materials about Francis had caused confusion about which details were reliable; and second, numerous changes had taken place in the community as a result of the tremendous increase in the number of his followers. In 1266 the earlier accounts by Thomas of Celano were ordered to be destroyed in favour of the official version by Bonaventure. Consequently, Celano's versions were lost for centuries, depriving scholars of his contribution towards understanding Francis's life.

In addition to the these official 'biographies', collections of anecdotes circulated that captured unique exchanges between Francis and his followers and others whom Francis touched. These collections have a long oral tradition, and they include stories sometimes not found in other writings. The stories reveal important insights into the character of Francis, even though at times they may overstress the miraculous and fanciful. Scholars have sometimes debated the trustworthiness of these accounts, but they capture the unique spirit and vision of Francis in ways that the lives by Celano and Bonaventure do not. For the most part they were written by companions who knew Francis well. Important sources of this kind are *The Legend of Perugia*, *The Legend of the Three Companions* and *The Little Flowers of St Francis*.

The Legend of Perugia is believed to be the work of Brother Leo, a beloved friend of Francis. It was one of Celano's sources and contains a wealth of stories, some of which Celano used and some of which he did not. It does not represent the same kind of writing as Celano, because it is not a more or less chronological account but a collection of the memories of a friend. In his introduction to the English translation, Theophile Desbonnets says it has all the positive qualities of a memoir, such as simplicity, lack of moralising and the spirit of Francis. But it also reflects a lack of concern for chronological order, a tendency to digress and a nostalgia for the past.³

The Legend of the Three Companions represents material that was collected to supplement Celano's first life of Francis. It contains the reflections of Leo, along with those of Angelus and Rufinus, who had also been companions of Francis. The *Legend* takes a somewhat more chronological approach, tracing the life of the saint from his birth to his canonization. But the material here offers a more personal point of view than the official lives. It, too, captures the spirit of Francis in a way that works based on a standard template cannot.

Finally, *The Little Flowers of St Francis*, the most popular presentation of Francis in the modern age, was written by Brother Ugolino, who lived a hundred years after Francis died. Little is known of this author, who heard many fascinating stories from friars about Francis that were not included in the earlier writings of Celano and Bonaventure. These stories

³ Theophile Desbonnets, 'Introduction' to *The Legend of Perugia*, translated by Paul Oligny, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis*, edited by Marion A. Habig (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1973), 970.

added depth and life to the earlier accounts. He included some, like those revolving around animals, that may have portrayed Francis too much as a free spirit to be included in the official lives. At the same time, the stories reveal the beginning of conflict within the order between those who wanted to hold to Francis's austere vision and those who wanted to adapt to the new conditions of the rapidly growing community.

These collections of narratives give us insight into the unique way that Francis dealt with problematic situations. Because these works give insights from people who knew him personally, it is useful to draw on some of the stories to see what Francis can teach us about attitudes applicable to problems of injustice today. His responses bring life and vitality to dilemmas that might otherwise be treated abstractly or impersonally.

Individuals in Need

You may recall a story that circulated some time ago.⁴ It was the tale of villagers who one day found a baby floating down the river. They rescued it. The next day there was another, and then another. The teller of the tale observed that what the villagers needed to do was ask why the babies were floating down the river and attack the problem at its cause. I doubt that St Francis would have seen this as his main task. Francis demonstrated, again and again, that he was not concerned with reforming institutions but with showing the love of God to each person; he cared about the well-being of the individual before systematic change. While justice on a social scale is critically important to us today, it is possible to lose sight of the individual in need. Not so for Francis.

Francis was a gentle revolutionary who was guided by a vision that was bigger than institutions and organizations. Reformers are inevitably concerned with making institutions work for the benefit of those they serve. But institutions are always part of larger social systems. They are part of economic systems, political systems, cultural systems. Such systems were not Francis' primary concern; he was concerned, though he would not have used that language, with a more overarching system, God's 'system'.

Francis's approach was shaped by the irreducible fact of being in relationship with everything in God's creation. There were major problems

⁴ It first appeared in *Must We Choose Sides? Christian Commitment for the 80s* (Oakland: Inter-Religious Task Force for Social Analysis, 1979), 114–115.

in his time, as in any time, but his call was to deal first with what was at hand against the background of the ultimate system of which it was a part—God’s universe. He first saw and responded to individuals embraced by God’s love. It was his mission to communicate that love and, in the process, he revolutionised religious life as it had existed until then.

The Coin and the Kiss

One of the first of the evils he encountered was disease, especially the disease of leprosy. Francis’s capacity for seeing each person as an image of God led him to reach out to the most marginalised; but initially he had the natural reaction to leprosy that anyone might have. His conversion enabled him to overcome his negative feelings. The *Legend of the Three Companions* recounts a revelation that Francis received from God, in which he was told that what formerly made him shudder would come to bring him peace. Shortly after the revelation, near Assisi, he met a leper. Though he had always felt ‘an overpowering horror of these sufferers’, he dismounted from his horse, gave the leper a coin and kissed his hand.⁵ Some days later he took a large sum of money to the leper hospital and gave alms to all who were there and kissed their hands. He became such a friend to lepers that he lived with them and served them eagerly.

The coin and the kiss symbolize a full response to someone in need. The coin represents a tangible way to alleviate the person’s material want; the kiss represents an emotional human response to the other as worthy of respect and compassion. It takes some form of both to make that response complete.



⁵ *The Legend of the Three Companions*, translated by Nesta de Robeck, n.11, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 900.

Violence and Peacemaking

Another area of concern that Francis addressed was violence. His response is seen in a variety of circumstances—with thieves, rulers, Saracens. In the *Legend of Perugia* we encounter a touching example of the vision, compassion and imagination of Francis. In one area where the friars lived a band of robbers came periodically to ask for food. One of the brothers commented that it was wrong to help them because they were inflicting evil on people, while others suggested they be helped at times to encourage them to conversion. When they went to Francis for advice, he suggested something more radical.

Francis told them to get some good bread and good wine, to spread a cloth on the ground, and to serve the robbers with humility and good humour. Then the brothers should ask for the love of God that they not strike or harm anyone. He told the brothers they should not ask everything at once. They should first show the robbers acceptance and understanding. On another day they should bring some eggs and cheese in addition to the bread and wine, and serve them again in the same manner. When trust was established, the brothers might speak to them of serving God, who would provide for their needs. In this way the followers of Francis learnt how to embody the gospel and bring about a deeper change of heart.⁶

Several other examples of non-violence appear. One can be found in his visit to Syria to confront the sultan. His goal was first to become a martyr, not to wage war on the side of the Crusaders. At the same time, he sought to persuade the sultan of the value of Christianity. His first attempt failed when he was unable to complete the journey. When he tried another trip later, he did reach the leader, after being roughed up by the military. They conversed freely and amicably, with Francis offering to demonstrate his faith in his God by walking through fire. After much discussion the sultan was not convinced, but Francis was given safe passage out of the camp, and they parted as friends. *The Little Flowers of St Francis* provides a much enlarged version of this story in which the sultan is converted, but not baptized until he is on his deathbed.⁷

⁶ *Legend of Perugia*, n. 90, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1063–1065.

⁷ See Bonaventure, *Major Life of St Francis*, translated by Benen Fahy, nn. 5–9, and *The Little Flowers of St Francis*, translated by Raphael Brown, n. 24, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 701–705 and 1353–1356.

Francis, in his unique way, deals with the injustice of violence, not by coercing or threatening but by standing defencelessly before the presumed enemy. While he does not address it on a large scale or on ideological grounds, he provides a firm foundation for the possibility of a deep change of heart.

On one occasion when Francis was very sick he learnt that the bishop of Assisi had excommunicated the *podestà* (mayor). In return the *podestà* had told the inhabitants of the city that they could not buy anything from or sell anything to the bishop. It pained Francis to see that no one intervened to reestablish peace between them. So, in addition to adding a verse to his Canticle of Creatures about the blessings of pardon, Francis had one of the friars go to the mayor's house to tell him to visit the bishop with his officials. He sent the other friars to the bishop's house. When everyone had assembled at the bishop's palace, two brothers addressed the group and asked them to listen to the Canticle Francis had written, which celebrated the solidarity of all God's creation and urged forgiveness. After hearing the Canticle the mayor rose and declared that he forgave all. Then, in the spirit of Francis, the bishop rose and said, 'My office demands humility of me, but by nature I am quick to anger: you must forgive me!'⁸ The two men forgot past rancour and embraced one another. The writer attributed the peaceful outcome to Francis's sanctity.

The example of Francis has led to the Franciscan way of resolving conflict. Having overcome a youthful enthusiasm for fighting battles, Francis was able to take on a role as peacemaker and facilitate the resolution of conflict. There is no talk of who is right and who is wrong, just the establishment of common ground.

Poverty and Almsgiving

Finally, Francis responded with heartfelt feeling towards the poor. Once when Francis was staying at the Portiuncula, a poor old woman came to the door asking for alms. When Francis asked the minister if they could find something for her, he responded that they had nothing they could give her. Francis asked him if they could give her a New Testament from among the few books they had. To highlight their solidarity with all those in need, he spoke of her as 'mother'. With the proceeds from selling this book, she could take care of her needs.⁹

⁸ *Legend of Perugia*, n. 44, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1022–1024, here 1024.

⁹ *Legend of Perugia*, n. 56, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1033.



St Francis Giving his Mantle to a Poor Man (detail), by Giotto

On other occasions when Francis encountered the poor, he often gave them a piece of clothing or asked another brother to do so. When he had nothing to hand he once removed the border of his tunic and gave it to a poor man.¹⁰ He never gave grudgingly or judged the poor. His non-judgmental attitude was evident when one poor sick man came looking for help. A companion of Francis commented that he might be a rich man, just pretending to be poor. Francis chided the brother for having spoken so uncharitably and urged him to seek forgiveness from the man. When the brother returned, Francis explained that he had sinned, not just against the poor man, but against Christ, who took on himself the poverty and weakness of the human race.¹¹

Lessons from the Life of Francis

From these various stories we can draw out some of the attitudes that Francis emphasized in living the gospel, attitudes which are needed to grow in sensitivity to the social justice needs of our own time. Among them are solidarity, non-judgment and empathy. While these qualities will not provide a formula or a strategy for dealing with social justice

¹⁰ Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of St Francis*, translated by Placid Hermann, n.89, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 436.

¹¹ Thomas of Celano, *The First Life of St Francis*, translated by Placid Hermann, n.76, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 292–293. See also *Legend of Perugia*, n.89, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1063.

issues, they are indispensable habits of the heart which prepare a climate for the transformation of individuals and, ultimately, society.

One night in the early days of the order the friars were awakened by a brother crying out, 'I am dying! I am dying!' Francis asked what was ailing him and the brother said he was dying of hunger (some of the friars at that time fasted excessively). Since he did not want the man to be embarrassed, he asked that a meal be prepared and had everyone partake of it. After all had eaten, Francis explained to the other brothers that each of them had different needs.¹² It was early in the life of the community, and they needed to learn that denying themselves superfluous things should not lead them to excessive mortification. Though his own austerity could sometimes be extreme, he tried to avoid leading them into slavish imitation or turning their simple life into something legalistic. Above all else, they were to love God and, by extension, one another. His example of spiritual discernment gives us a clue to the spirit of solidarity and compassion he exemplified in dealing with the social evils he encountered in the world.

Solidarity is the foundation of relations within creation. All creatures trace their origins to the love and unity of God. We are tied to one another by invisible threads. When we harm others we ultimately harm ourselves because we are all part of a common fabric and share the same environment. We all bear the image of God. We not only share one another's blessings; we also share one another's burdens. An attitude of solidarity prompts us not only to recognise the image of God in others and ourselves, but also to accept weakness in others and, above all, in ourselves. We who are used to being active and who judge ourselves on our successes and accomplishments, even spiritual accomplishments, often find it hard to comprehend the power of honesty about our limitations. Our limits and our weaknesses (often the underside of our strengths) represent our greatest claim on God. It is these traits that make it possible to comprehend the compassion of God and therefore to know how to reflect that compassion in our lives and attitudes towards others.

The thieves in the forest who prey on others, and sometimes suffer hunger, really are our brothers. Their ineffective ways of meeting their needs cover their fears and anger about their state in life. They will be disarmed not by taking away their weapons but by offering them hospitality

¹² *Legend of Perugia*, n. 1, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 977–978.

and courtesy. We may not encounter a situation so dramatic as this, but we can see the same principle in small moments. The commonplace inconsiderateness of others—the driver who cuts us off on the road, the noisy mobile-phone user—is an opportunity to remind ourselves of solidarity.

***Self-blame
will not make
us any better***

To be inspired by Francis is to hang up our tools and analyses until we learn to see ourselves as connected to every other human being who has harboured small thoughts and narrow aspirations. Francis would not expect us to berate ourselves for being impatient, judgmental or small-minded, or for having such feelings in the first place. Self-blame will not make us any better. What will help is using our own shortcomings as a reminder of God's love and compassion, treating them as Francis treated others. The faults of others were for him reminders of his own faults and of the beautiful mercy of God.

Francis teaches us to avoid judging others, whether they be poor, as when the brother doubted that the beggar was as poor as he appeared, or rich—Francis reminds us that the rich are children of the same creator and have the opportunity to help others.¹³ Francis was sensitive to his companions and could tell what was behind a brother's demeanour. He once observed a brother who judged him for riding (Francis was weak from illness) when the brother had to walk. Francis dealt with it not by defending himself but by telling the brother that he should ride instead because he had come from nobility whereas Francis had not. This remark opened the brother's eyes to his tendency to judge.¹⁴

These qualities of solidarity and non-judgment find their full flowering in empathy. Empathy differs from sympathy in that sympathy expresses a feeling of regret that another is suffering whereas empathy is the ability to enter into the suffering of another to such an extent that we suffer with them. Empathy is not the result of reasoning, but is instinctual, a habit of the heart. Most of us are pretty good at sympathy. We can feel sorry for the pain of another. But sympathy gives us a bit of distance from that pain. For Francis there was no distance. He could enter into other people's pain because they were his brothers and sisters. You know who is your brother or sister without having to stop and work it out.

¹³ *Legend of the Three Companions*, n. 58, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 942.

¹⁴ *Legend of Perugia*, n. 30, in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 1007–1008.

Justice and Love

These are just a few of the lessons that Francis can offer us about the foundations of social justice. Keen vision and good analysis are critically important for charting the path of justice, but they are not enough. Social justice springs from a deeper source than redress. It springs from an innate love for all that God creates. I began by raising the question of whether St Francis of Assisi represents a good model for the exercise of social justice. If we approach him looking for a critique of systems, he probably does not. But if we recognise the crucial role of the gifts of his spirit, he is a most suitable model.

Francis of Assisi respected the thieves in the forest before he tried to change them. He reached out to the poor to inspire a response from others before there was an institutional solution to their problems. He recognised the capacity of the mayor and the bishop to respond to one another from the noblest aspects of their characters. In these and other instances, his own action was an inspiration and motivating force. The best plans in the world will not ignite real change unless there is such contagious motivation.

Hans Kung cites the qualities that Francis embodies which should guide the Church in its quest for justice as well as society's quest. He lived a life of generosity and freedom from possessions instead of greed. He lived a life of humility and open-handed acceptance of all instead of power and domination. He lived a life of simplicity and joy in place of legalism. There is no better example than a life well lived to motivate others and change hearts. It is no wonder that the present Pope has chosen such a saint to be his guide.¹⁵

Jane Kopas was professor of religious studies at the University of Scranton where she taught theology, religious studies and women's studies. She is author of *Sacred Identity* (1995) and *Seeking the Hidden God* (2005) as well as numerous articles. She currently lives in New Jersey, USA.

¹⁵ Hans Kung, *Can We Save the Catholic Church?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 335–336.