

FRANCIS & THE DISCERNMENT OF VOCATION

by
Gordon Plumb

On February 24th 1208, the Feast of St Matthias, Francis heard Mass and during it the words of Matthew 10 that were to give direction to his whole life.

Provide no gold, silver, or copper to fill your purse, no pack for the road, no second coat, no shoes, no stick; the worker earns his keep.

When he had had the words explained more fully by the priest after Mass, Francis exclaimed:

This is what I want. This is what I long for with all my heart.

And so, after long searching, much praying, and many partial understandings, a vocation was discerned and grasped and acted upon.

Soon he was joined by others, including Bernard of Quintavalle. On April 16th 1208 the two of them went to the little church of St Niccolo in Assisi and opened the book of the Gospels three times. The resulting Scripture texts were all they needed. "This is our life and our rule, and the life and rule of all who wish to join our company." God's plan for them seemed so very clear.

Yes, it seemed so clear at the time! And yet not many years later Francis began to have doubts about the road to follow, There seemed too many roads to follow, and yet they all seemed to lead to the Lord. They all appeared to offer something good in the building of the Lord's kingdom. One road lead to the mountain solitude where Francis could hear the Lord speaking so clearly in the silence. And yet Francis could also hear the Lord speaking very clearly down in the valley in the pains and sorrows of the townsfolk. He felt the urge to go and proclaim penance and peace in a world where both those things were so desperately needed.

In 1210, on his way back from Rome Celano tells us in his first life, that Francis began to have these doubts – that agony of indecision about whether his vocation and that of his followers was to preach or to devote themselves to a life of prayer:

...following their blessed father, they entered the Spoleto Valley. These true proponents of justice conferred together about whether they should live among people or go off to solitary places. St Francis did not put his trust in his own efforts, but with holy prayer coming before any decision, he chose not to live for himself alone, but for the one who died for all. (I Celano 35)

I Celano 91 speaks of the tension that Francis seems to have felt within himself between the active and contemplative callings:

At one time the blessed and venerable father Francis, with worldly crowds gathering eagerly every day to hear and see him, sought out a place of rest and secret solitude. He desired to free himself for God and shake off any dust that clung to him from the time spent with the crowds. It was his custom to divide the time given him to merit grace and, as seemed best, to spend some of it to benefit his neighbours and use the rest in the blessed solitude of contemplation....

Throughout his active life Francis would withdraw for periods of 40 days of fasting and prayer. Bonaventure in LM IX.2-3 speaks of fasts and retreats for prayer at La Verna for 40 days after Epiphany; and again for forty days after the feast of Peter and Paul; and again for 40 days after the Assumption in honour of the Virgin. Clearly the contemplative life drew Francis strongly – and one gets the impression at times that only a burning desire to emulate the example of Christ who came down from the Father’s embrace to save souls moved him to go out to preach.

But all of this is by way of preamble to the main incident I wish to discuss today. It occurs in two places, once in Bonaventure’s Major Life, (chapter XII, sections 1-2), and then again in the Deeds of Blessed Francis and his Companions section 16 (also translated from Latin into Italian and known as the Fioretti, or Little Flowers). Again it is section 16 there. The incident is not mentioned in either of Celano’s lives or in other sources.

Bonaventure wrote his life, according to the traditional, and at times slightly dismissive, view of it, to heal the wounds that had begun to divide the Order between those seeking an rigorous interpretation of the Rule and those wanting a more relaxed understanding of it. This view led scholars such as John Moorman to suggest that Bonaventure “never really understood the Franciscan ideal “ (Sources for the life of S Francis p141). Moorman wrote those words in 1940 – and since then a sea-change has come over the way the Franciscan sources are understood. Not least is this true with regard to the Major Life of Francis by Bonaventure. Since the pioneering dissertation of Regis Armstrong in 1978 it has become clear that Bonaventure was not merely composing another legend alongside or to replace those of Thomas of Celano. The Major Life of Bonaventure is nothing less than a treatise on the spiritual life with Francis as the model – it is a major work of mystical theology drawing heavily on the two lives of Celano and adding little new material on the life of Francis to them. What it does is to structure material taken from throughout the life of Francis from earlier sources and structure it according to a thematic plan. In his prologue to the life Bonaventure says that he does not present his material chronologically, but according to themes.

In fact that is not entirely true. In the Major Life two patterns of arrangement are discernible. There is a general chronological framework in the first four chapters which deal with the early life and conversion of Francis and the foundation and spread of the Order, and in chapters thirteen through fifteen which deal with the Stigmata, Francis’s death and canonisation. But the section of chapters five through thirteen deal with the virtues displayed in the life of Francis, organised according to themes. (Chapter thirteen falls into both kinds of arrangement). In chapters five through thirteen Bonaventure draws together incidents from various periods as illustrations of Francis’s practice of such virtues as poverty, obedience and piety. And this section of nine chapters on the virtues has an inner order according to the three stages of the spiritual life – Purgation, Illumination and Perfection (or Mystical Union).

In this work Bonaventure is proposing Francis to the friars as a model of the gospel way of life, someone in whose life we can see the dynamics of spiritual growth. This life of Francis was the one that shaped the Order's understanding of Francis more than any other. Until the last century it was the principal life of Francis known to the Order – the decree that existing lives of Francis should be destroyed after The Major Life was written meant that the two lives of Celano disappeared entirely until the early nineteenth century. Bonaventure's Major Life is a major work of western spirituality. It is the work around which the three-month Franciscan Programme of Spiritual Direction and Directed Retreats that I undertook last year is based. It offers a rich treasury of material about our Franciscan vocation for us to meditate on and use to help shape our own spiritual journey into Christ after the example of Saint Francis.

Seen in the light of all this, the incident of Francis seeking guidance about his vocation is more than just another story about the life of Francis. It is a model for us of Franciscan discernment. It presents us with a model that we can reflect on today to draw out principles for us to use in our own discerning the will of God.

Later on in the history of the tradition, this story about Francis and discernment was taken up in the Deeds of Blessed Francis and his companions and in its Italian translation, the *Fioretti*. There it was amplified somewhat. But the essential outlines are there for us in Bonaventure Chapter XII, sections 1-2.

The exact date of this incident is unknown – The Deeds of Francis and his Companions merely state that it was: “in the beginning of his conversion when he had amassed many followers.” John Moorman in his *History of the Franciscan Order* (page 26) suggests that it took place after the gift to Francis of La Verna by Orlando of Chiusi. This must be speculation – though the suggestion is attractive and plausible. Francis clearly felt the draw of the life of prayer – I referred just now to the extended periods of prayer and fasting that Francis kept throughout the year. The existence of La Verna – which we know was to become so important to him – must have exerted a pull on him. But Moorman's suggestion must remain speculation and is in one sense not important to us.

What is important is to examine the story as Bonaventure tells it – and with reference where necessary to the later version in the *Deeds/Fioretti*. Bonaventure begins chapter XII with a characteristic reference to Francis which draws attention to his exercise of the virtues in a way that at least obliquely calls to mind the example of Christ himself. (And Bonaventure was to picture Francis in the Major Life almost as an *alter Christus*).

The truly faithful servant and minister of Christ,
Francis,
in order to do everything faithfully and perfectly,
directed his efforts chiefly
to the exercise of those virtues which,
by the prodding of the sacred Spirit,
he knew pleased his God more.

Francis, it seems, found himself in an agony of doubt over whether he should remain as a preacher or devote his life to prayer.

In this matter it happened that he fell into a great struggle over a doubt *which*, after he returned from many days of prayer, he proposed for resolution to the brothers who were close to him.

“What do you think, brothers, what do you judge better? That I should spend my time in prayer, or that I should travel about preaching?”

What we should note, first of all, is that Francis proposed this question to his brothers only after spending many days in prayer on his own. That is worthy of note, because I think we can be sure that in those days Francis would have had to face up to his own feelings, his own desires, and to have sought to free himself from his own self-will. Only if this had happened could Francis hear the advice that others he consulted might try to give him. Discernment as Bonaventure presents it here is a process which we must distinguish from the act of making a decision. And a vital component in the process is that initial step of facing up to one’s own self-will and one’s own feelings about the issue involved. That remains as true now as then.

Something of what those feelings might have been are indicated by what Francis is recorded as going on to say to his brothers:

I am a poor little man, simple and *unskilled in speech*; I have received a greater grace of prayer than of speaking. Also in prayer there seems to be a profit and an accumulation of graces, but in preaching a distribution of gifts already received from heaven.

“In prayer there is a purification of interior affections and a uniting to the one, true and supreme good with an invigorating of virtue; in preaching, there is a dust on our spiritual feet, distraction over many things and relaxation of discipline.

“Finally, in prayer we address God, listen to Him, and, as if living an angelic life, we associate with the angels. In preaching, it is necessary to practice great self-emptying for people and, by living humanly among them, to think, see, speak, and hear human things.

Some pre-conceptions of Francis that created the tension he felt within himself are indicated here. We might also include among them the remark at the beginning of Fioretti 16 that this happened “when he had amassed many followers.” Perhaps demands of a quite different kind were beginning to emerge with the growth of the Order. Francis perhaps felt pulled towards the life of contemplation as an escape from a task to which he did not feel particularly called and for which he did not see himself as well equipped.

In all this we see Francis’ attraction to the life of prayer – that emerges clearly in what he says about prayer as well as what he says about the life of a preacher. But Francis acknowledges his inner motivations quite honestly – he admits he finds greater profit from prayer and that the life of a preacher brings

dust to his spiritual feet, distraction over many things and the constant danger of relaxation of discipline. There is a sense that Francis knows himself well and the possible things, his own inclinations, which might prevent him from being free to hear the voice of the Lord.

It may be that the emphasis on his being simple and unlearned is in fact a bit of special pleading – we know from recent scholarship that Francis was rather less unlearned than has sometimes been suggested. And the impact of his preaching suggests that, though he was not a trained orator, he was an effective communicator! That is maybe not the important point here. Rather we should note that Francis is shown as trying to evaluate his own strengths and weaknesses. And that is another important step in any process of Discernment – and one that Bonaventure shows Francis as taking at the outset.

But Francis was not content simply to look at his own desires and what he felt himself to be good at or not.

“But there is one thing to the contrary that seems to outweigh all these considerations before God, that is, the only begotten Son of God, who is the highest wisdom, came down from *the bosom of the Father* for the salvation of souls in order to instruct the world by His example and to speak the *word* of salvation to people, whom He would redeem by the price of His sacred blood, *cleanse with its washing* and sustain with its draught, holding back for Himself absolutely nothing that He could freely give for our salvation. And because we should do everything according to the *pattern* shown to us in Him as *on the heights of the mountain*, it seems more pleasing to God that I interrupt my quiet and go out to labor.”

There was also the Christological example – there was theological reflection, if you like, as well. What light did reflection on the life and example of the one that Francis urged his followers to make their exemplar throw on the decision about which he was seeking the will of the Lord?

This is but another demonstration of Francis’ desire to follow Christ and his example unconditionally:

Let all of us, brothers, consider the Good Shepherd who bore the suffering of the cross to save his sheep.

The Lord’s sheep followed him in tribulation and persecution, in shame and hunger, in weakness and temptation, and in other ways; and for these things they received eternal life from the Lord. (Admonition VI).

With these words Francis leads us into the central purpose of his life – and of ours. This is the deepest secret of his way of life: the direct following of Christ; following as imitation, as renewed exemplification of his earthly life as God-man. Francis does not ask his brothers to follow the example of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem, as other religious founders before his time and since have done. Nor was he concerned to urge them to show forth a renewed life of the apostles. No, he looked directly at Christ for imitation. And so must we. Kajetan Esser in fact has said that “we could formulate the basic law of our Franciscan life thus: As Christ lived on earth, so Francis wanted to live, and so we should live!”

Clare bears her testimony to the fact that this is the way of Francis in her Testament.

“The Son of God has been made for us the way (John 14:6), which our blessed father Francis, his true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example.”

Having purified his own mind about his desires, and having reflected on the example of Christ, Francis was still unable to arrive at a decision. And so he asks the brothers to seek God’s will with him.

When he had mulled over these words for many days with his brothers, he could not perceive with certainty which of these he should choose as more acceptable to Christ. Although he understood extraordinary things through the spirit of prophecy, this question he could not resolve with clarity on his own.

Francis does not come to them asking for confirmation of a decision he has already made. He is genuinely seeking an answer and not for confirmation of what he has already been shown. Despite his seeing his own desires clearly, and despite his sharing the matter openly with them, the way ahead was still not clear.

Francis involves the community. And it is interesting to compare this discernment process with that Ignatius sets out in the Spiritual Exercises. That is far more obviously a one-to-one process. But Franciscan Discernment is a community process. This is but one more example of Francis’ desire to renounce self will, the whole pattern of living by grasping, and live by *sine proprio* (quite inadequately translated as poverty). Francis renounces the choice entirely and seeks first of all the guidance of his brothers, and then, when those with him cannot help him either, he asks others whose holiness he respects to ask God on his behalf.

As long as he lived,
this was his highest philosophy,
this was his highest desire:
to ask
from the wise and the simple,
the perfect and the imperfect,
the young and the old,
how he could more effectively arrive
at the summit of perfection.

And so Francis sends to Sylvester and to Clare.

Choosing, therefore, two of the brothers, he sent them to Brother Sylvester, who had seen the cross coming out from his mouth, and, at that time, spent his time in continuous prayer on the mountain above Assisi. He was to ask God to resolve his doubt over this matter, and to send him the answer in God’s name. He also asked the holy virgin Clare to consult with the purest and simplest of the virgins living under her rule, and to pray herself with the other sisters in order to seek *the Lord’s will* in this matter.

Francis turns to two contemplatives, to Clare who Francis knew well to be a holy person and a channel of grace, and to Sylvester, who lived on the

mountain above Assisi. Sylvester the former secular priest with a greed for money, who had had a vision that brought him into the Order and who was now the man of prayer. Clare who had renounced so much to follow the Poverello and whose commitment to Francis' original vision remained strong to the end. Clare who, John Moorman suggests, may not have wanted the enclosed contemplative life for herself at all and who therefore perhaps knew something of the agony that gripped Francis. Sylvester, who probably joined the Order soon after the return from Rome in 1210, and who would probably have heard about the debates that had taken place on the way back about the nature of the small band's calling. Sylvester who had himself answered the call to live as a contemplative and understood that difficult choice as well. Francis chose well – he chose holy people, people slightly detached from his situation, but he also chose people who would have an insight into the agony of indecision that gripped him. But above all two people who would seek God's will for him.

Bonaventure tells us that Francis sent two friars with the message to Sylvester and to Clare. In the *Deeds* and in the *Fioretti* it is Brother Masseo who is sent by Francis. In the *Deeds* and the *Fioretti* the story is made more dramatic. Francis washes the feet of Masseo and prepares him a meal and only then calls him into the woods, kneels down and asks him what the answer of the Lord is. The answer that comes back from both Sylvester and Clare is that Francis should continue to preach – Francis was not called for himself alone but also for the salvation of others.

Francis at once sets out on the roads to preach – and he goes as one given new strength. In the *Deeds* and in the *Fioretti* his preaching at Cannara meets with such a response that many from the town, men and women, wanted to follow him. And we are told that "From that time on he thought about instituting a Third Order for the salvation of all everywhere." The response of Francis and the effect of his preaching are themselves confirmation of the answer that had been received and the decision that Francis then made to go and preach. This was the will of the Lord, shown by signs following.

And so a process of discernment is elaborated for us as Franciscans. A process that is rooted in prayer, a process that involves the community and also particular individuals within it.

And we have to ask what this might have to say to us today.

Well, as a Third Order we have in recent years undergone a through-going Review of our life together. And we have done this in a way that it seems to me respects much of the process of Franciscan Discernment that I have tried to outline from the sources this morning. The whole exercise was conceived and undertaken in the spirit of prayer. There was consultation with the whole Order through the questionnaire and in other ways. And the two consultants were people whose judgement was respected but who were slightly detached from the situation though knowing a good deal about it. I actually feel that the Review was a fairly good example of how Franciscans ought to go about seeking God's will for the future of their Order – not perfect, maybe, but a comfortable pass mark!

Discerning together in this way – whether about our collective future or about issues affecting individuals – ought to be something that comes naturally to

us. I would see it as part of what it means to belong to an Order. We seek to discover God's will for us together. I particularly hope that the local groups might – and perhaps already in part do – function as places where we can hope to discern together what God is asking us to do. This demands a good deal of trust in the other group members. But it is a vision that excites me.

I conclude by returning for a moment to the incident with which I began – Francis on St Matthias Day 1208. I return to there because it adds some elements which need to be called to mind in connection with Franciscan discernment along with what I have drawn out of this passage from Bonaventure's Life chapter XII.

Francis is shown as humbly listening to the Word of God – and doing so again in community. He listens within the Eucharistic assembly (and we need to remember how important the Eucharist was to Francis.

He listens aware that he may not have fully understood the passage – and so he seeks the help of those more acquainted with the Church's understanding of Scripture. He approaches the priest, one of the appointed teachers of the Church. He has the humility to seek help from others.

We have looked at a story about Francis that has a wider message for us all as Franciscans. It enunciates a way in which we can prayerfully seek together to discover the Lord's will for us as individuals, for our local groups and for our Areas and for our Order as a whole. Underlying it all is the desire of Francis to do the Lord's will above all else – a desire for a growing conformity to the Lord Jesus. It is another part of that way of living without grasping (*sine proprio*), that path of self-renunciation that Francis glimpsed in his Lord and sought to follow all the days of his earthly ministry. And to the same way of living we are called as together we seek to discern the Lord's will for us in our day. We belong together to the Third Order, and together we are called to a lifelong process of discerning, and then obeying, the will of the Lord in all things.

FRANCIS & THE DISCERNMENT OF VOCATION

In this contribution I have examined a story about Francis recounted in St Bonaventure's *Major Life* of Francis chapter XII, sections 1-2, and in *The Fioretti* (or *Little Flowers*) section 16 and the Latin text (from which *The Fioretti* was translated), *The Deeds of St Francis and his Companions* section 16.

It is an incident in which Francis is agonizing over whether to remain as a preacher, or devote himself to a life of prayer. I have largely based what I have said on the text of Bonaventure's *Major Life*, not least because that is not just another biography but a major work on the spiritual life with Francis as our model.

I suggest that this story of Francis seeking to discern the will of God provides us with a Franciscan Process of discernment.

The process begins with Francis having spent a good deal of time in prayer on his own – during which he has examined his own strengths and weaknesses and his own natural inclinations and desires before God and purified them. He truly seeks the will of God.

He then seeks the guidance of his brothers – and with them spends a long time in prayer seeking to discover the Lord's will.

When that still does not enable him to know the will of the Lord he chooses two people that he trusts to seek the guidance of the Lord on his behalf - Sylvester and Clare. They have both chosen the life of prayer - and yet are likely to understand something of the agony that Francis is in. And they are both slightly detached from the situation.

In consulting both his brothers and Sylvester and Clare, Francis is genuinely seeking to know the will of the Lord and not merely desiring ratification of a decision already made. Francis has renounced self-will in the matter.

Francis also makes it clear to the brothers when he asks them to help him that he considers the example of Jesus to be crucial – there is a theological, Christological component to the process. What does the example of Jesus say to us about the issue we are seeking guidance about? This is of a piece with the rest of Francis' life, in which he sought to follow the example of Christ in all things.

This Franciscan process of discernment is thus community-centred. That is quite different to the Ignatian, Jesuit, model, where discernment is far more a one-to-one matter.

Franciscan discernment is thus a process rooted in prayer. It begins by recognising before God our own inclinations about the matter in question, and our own strengths and weaknesses; It involves seeking the advice, prayer and help of our brothers and

sisters (and the example of Francis shows this can take several different forms). At its heart the whole process is but the outworking of the Franciscan principle of *sine proprio* – of living without grasping. The example of Jesus is crucial.

Question for discussion:

What might the implications of this Franciscan process of Discernment be for us as Tertiaries – in our small groups, in our Areas and in our Order as a whole, and how can we make it a reality in our life together?