

The Prologue to the Ofs Rule

Paula Pearce, Opening talk for the Beatitudes Chapter

Since the 19th century, scholarship has abounded concerning Francis of Assisi. Partly this reflects that Francis has remained a very popular saint that people sought to know. As people asked, “Who is the real Jesus of Nazareth?” leading to significant developments in scriptural scholarship, there emerged a broad interest in who the real (historical) Francis of Assisi was. There were many and varied ideas – just as people will arrive at our fraternities with some idea of who Francis is for them and we sometimes have to challenge their perceptions.

In the case of Francis, the work of Paul Sabatier and that other non-Catholic scholars positively led Catholics to seek out, translate and interpret the Franciscan writings and sources but negatively led to disputes and challenges because some interpretations depicted Francis as a critic of the Church and a revolutionary.

Although there was a great revival and much work done on all sources, divergent interpretations and remembrances of Francis remained as part of the long history of the Franciscan friars over centuries.

We have the benefit of wide-ranging scholarship on Franciscan sources and the developments that occurred while scholars were seeking a resolution of issues that arose in the course of study. In particular, as members of the Secular Franciscan Order, we have, in the Prologue to our rule, a writing by Saint Francis, *Earlier Exhortation*, which was given particular attention by by Kajetan Esser and Rafaelli Pazelli, published between 1974-1977. Their work led to the discovery of a manuscript that had been copied, retaining red ink used for the title of a new work and new sections, such as the first letter of each chapter and of a conclusion. Other researchers had access to copies only in black. The red ink highlighted the title, the beginning of the work, translated as “These are the words of life and salvation, Whoever reads will find life and draw from the Lord salvation” Pazzelli concluded that the words written in red at the end of the title, which can be translated as “Concerning those who do Penance” (de illis qui faciunt penitentiam) indicated that this writing was for the Brothers and Sisters of Penance – the name by which the early members of our Order, now known as the Secular Franciscan Order, were known. In other words, this text must be the first rule given to our Order by Francis. (Esser)1974 4 ministers General 1977 reinforcing Esser’s conclusion.

The breaks indicated by single red letters in this text are as follows: the initial letter of the text, the beginning of the second section that we call Chapter 2 and the first letter of the Conclusion.

This discovery was made near the time of the new Pauline Rule project where it was to have added importance and significance. It is believed that Esser’s work was the reason that led the Ministers General to recommend that this text should form the Prologue to the 1978 Rul when they were considering the latest draft of the new rule. The reason for their decision was not recorded at the time (1977). Other introductions had previously been written afor the new rule as part of the rule project. In its final review stage, the Sacred Congregation was pleased that a Franciscan writing for penitents emerged for the Prologue but indicated a preference for the *Later Admonition and Exhortation*, known as the Letter to the Faithful. In response, the Ministers General explained their preference by reference to

the conclusions of Esser and Pazelli that it was the *Earlier Exhortation* that was specifically for members of the Order as it had been given to them as their own form of life.

Why we should see the Prologue as the lens through which we understand and interpret our OFS Rule? It comes directly from Francis and provides a spiritual/Franciscan supplement very different in tone from a legal document.

The opening paragraph is a summary of the Life of Penance, the life we strive to follow. This paragraph refers to the way we are to live and exhorts members to persevere in it.

How often do we really hear what we read in our Rule? We hear in the Prologue direct reference to John's gospel, as is often the case with Francis. He may slightly change the order in which he takes verses and occasionally add/amend words. Believing what John learned from Jesus, Francis wants us to believe that we can have a true relationship with God, the persons of the Trinity and that we can, by our example bring true light to others.

With the Spirit – which will rest upon them, make a dwelling place in them.

With the heavenly Father - if we seek, as Francis, to follow the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we are sons of the Father – as the Son did the work of the Father, we do the same when we follow the way Christ taught.

Through the grace of the Holy Spirit our souls can be united with Jesus, who wants to espouse our souls. Like Francis, ever seeking the will of the Father, acting on God's will makes us brothers and sisters of Jesus. Francis wants us to truly believe that we can be in personal communion with God; that we can seek the grace to conform our wills to that of God and that we can discern clearly what God's will is and carry it out.

We also have Mary, the Mother of God, to show us the way to be mothers to Jesus – she carried him in her womb and gave birth to him. We are his mothers when we carry him in our heart and body, this is the result of a pure and sincere conscience which divine love wants of us and will grace us with if we truly have him at our centre; we give birth through a holy life which can be a light to others.

Francis praises and exalts the Trinity and then returns to the Johannine image of Jesus giving up his life for his sheep, chapter 10, and ends this section with verses from John Chapter 17, asking the Father for the same care and protection as Jesus asked for those whom God had given him - those who were faithful followers of Him

Francis, the Penitent, recognised that it was the call, love and mercy of God that drew him to the life of penance. Penance is the only possible response to a loving God but the penitent will spend his life seeking to discern God's call, to understand what is being asked and to choose to carry out God's will. Jesus is our exemplar, the one whose footsteps the Penitent must strive to follow. Seeking to live sincerely as a penitent will change one's life, so lead to conversion and, consequently, bearing worthy fruits of penance.

Shortly after our Rule was promulgated, the Third Order Regular finished work on their new Rule. They are also direct descendants of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. They too used the *Earlier Exhortation* as the Prologue to their Rule but they, unlike us, only chose to take Chapter One.

The second chapter is difficult. Francis paints one way of life in an extraordinary way and then makes a stark, bleak contrast for those who do not do penance. You can see this when you read the chapters side by side.

The following suggestions are found in Robert Stewart's book *De Illis qui Faciunt Penitentiam; The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, pages 165-6.

Chapter 1

Exultation of the way of penance

Blessed those who do penance

1-4 The way of Penance

5-7 The blessing of penance

8-13 *Exultation over our relationship with God*

8-10 Explanation

11-13 Astonished explanation

14-19 *Prayer to the Father*

19 The Glory in the Kingdom of God

Chapter 2

Reminder to those on the way of sin

The blind or those who do not do

Penance.

1-5 The Way without Penance

6-10 the tragic consequences

11-18 *Exhortation to Convert*

11-14 Call in direct address

See you who are blind....

15-18 Generalisation

The body grows infirm.....

18 The Pain in Hell

19-22 *Epilogue*

As Chapter 1 ends with quotes from John Chapter 17. Chapter 2 takes another Johannine theme – blindness and sight (John 9: 39-41) which is about the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees. Jesus tells them that their guilt is because they claim they can see. He does not condemn spiritual blindness of itself. John's gospel passes harsh judgment on those who are spiritually blind when they refuse to believe who Jesus is. The second chapter of our Prologue has a similar tone towards those who do not do penance whom he describes as blind.

Francis spent his life preaching God's mercy and love to all and had the deepest desire to share his experience of God's love and mercy with everyone. He was deeply saddened by those who remained drawn to the flesh and the world, to earthly temptations. We still hear preachers who focus more on fear of judgement and the wrath of God, than on the experience of God's love and mercy, to bring about conversion.

In the early rule of the brothers, the rule that was not approved but which we are very fortunate to have a version of in *The Saint* Chapter 22 is very similar to Chapter 2 of our Rule but it is more detailed in referring to the work of the devil:

“Let us be aware of the malice and craftiness of Satan who does not want anyone to turn his mind and heart to God. And prowling around, he wants to ensnare a person's heart under the guise of some reward or assistance, to choke out the word and precepts of the Lord from our memory and desiring a person's heart, he wants to blind it through worldly concerns to live there.....

“Therefore, all my brothers, let us be very much on our guard, that under the guise of some reward or assistance, we do not lose or take our mind away from God.putting aside every care and anxiety, serve, love, honour and adore the Lord God with a clean

heart and a pure mind...in whatever way they are best able to do so, for that is what he wants above all”

In chapter 22 you will find other parallels with our Prologue. It is worth reading in full.

What is important for us in understanding better the Prologue is to see that it gives to opposite poles – what we can be in our journey to full communion with God, in Chapter 1 which contains wonderful possibilities for our souls and hearts. God wants our hearts to be his home and dwelling place.

Chapter 2 tells us starkly the Satan above all wants our hearts and souls. In fact, Chapter 22 of the *Earlier Rule* comes from Francis’ understanding that that this is the purpose of Satan’s work. This is the opposite pole, depicted equally graphically and it is something very alien today.

Other great spiritual writers have their own way of describing the work of Satan equally graphically eg Ignatius of Loyola in the Spiritual Exercises where Satan is depicted as a very real enemy leader: brash, noisy, colourful, attracting everyone’s attention, contrasted with the humble, physically unremarkable Jesus.

Questions following the Prologue talk

Chapter 2 takes a Johannine theme – blindness and sight.

1. Think of a specific ways that being part of the OFS helps me:

- (a) to see clearly
- (b) to grow in spiritual wisdom
- (c) to reflect on what leads me to live in and for God.

2. In life today, what are the temptations we face? What seduces us into choosing deception?

What earthly values/riches am I attached to or find attractive?

3. What struggles and conflicts do we meet as we strive to keep to the way of penance?