

PERFECT JOY

Have on hand: O.F.S. Rule

Our *Rule*, Articles #13 and #19, are read by someone.

We recall the words of St. Paul (*Philippians 4:4-6*): “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.”

We are familiar with the following story, this dialogue in St. Francis’ life. This shorter form is taken from *True and Perfect Joy*: “The same [Brother Leonard] related in the same place that one day at Saint Mary’s, blessed Francis called Brother Leo and said: ‘Brother Leo, write.’ He responded: ‘Look, I’m ready!’ ‘Write,’ he said, ‘what true joy is.’



Jusepe de Ribera: St. Francis, 1642

“A messenger arrives and says that all the Masters of Paris have entered the Order. Write: this isn’t true joy! Or, that all the prelates, archbishops and bishops beyond the mountains, as well as the King of France and the King of England [have entered the Order]. Write: this isn’t true joy! Again, that my brothers have gone to the non-believers and converted all of them to the faith; again, that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and perform many miracles. I tell you true joy doesn’t consist in any of these things.’

“Then what is true joy?”

“I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night. It’s winter time, muddy, and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs and blood flows from such wounds. Freezing, covered with mud and ice, I come to the gate and, after I’ve knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: ‘Who are you?’ ‘Brother Francis,’ I answer. ‘Go away!’ he says. ‘This is not a decent hour to be wandering about! You may not come in!’ When I insist, he replies: ‘Go away! You are simple and stupid! Don’t come back to us again! There are many of us here like you – we don’t need you!’ I stand again at the door and say: ‘For the love of God, take me in tonight!’ And he replies: ‘I will not! Go to the Crosiers’ place and ask there!’

“I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this.”¹

Q1. What makes this “perfect joy”? What essential requisites do I need to develop to be able to share St. Francis’ opinion in such a case?

In *The Assisi Compilation* we read: “And he [Francis] used to say: ‘The devil is delighted when he can extinguish or prevent devotion and joy in the heart of a servant of God which spring from clean prayer and other good works. ...’

“Blessed Francis had this as his highest and main goal: he was always careful to have and preserve in himself spiritual joy internally and externally, ...

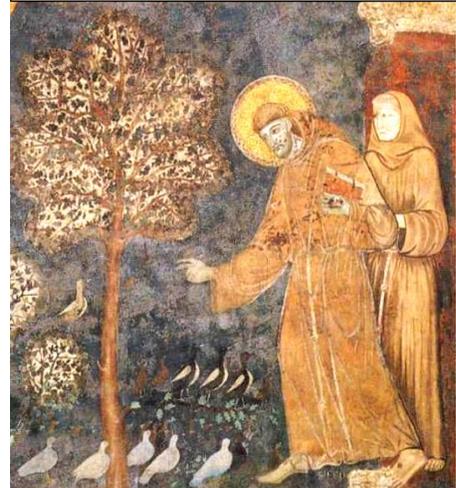
“He used to say that if a servant of God always strives to have and preserve joy internally and externally which proceeds from purity of heart, the devils can do him no harm. They would say: ‘Since the servant of God has joy both in tribulation and in prosperity, we do not know where to find an entrance to enter him and do him harm.’

“One day he reproved one of his companions who looked sad and long-faced. He told him: ‘Why are you sad and sorrowful over your offenses? It is a matter between you and God. Pray to Him,

that by His mercy He may grant you the joy of His salvation. Try to be joyful always around me and others, because it is not fitting that a servant of God appear before his brother or others with a sad and glum face.”²

Thomas of Celano makes this observation about St. Francis: “He so loved the man filled with spiritual joy, that at one chapter he had these words written down as a general admonition: ‘Let them be careful not to appear outwardly as sad and gloomy hypocrites but show themselves joyful, cheerful, and consistently gracious in the Lord.’”³ Celano recalls: “This holy man insisted that spiritual joy was an infallible remedy against a thousand snares and tricks of the enemy. He used to say: ‘The devil is most delighted when he can steal the joy of spirit from a servant of God. He carries dust which he tries to throw into the tiniest openings of the conscience, to dirty a clear mind and a clean life. But if spiritual joy fills the heart, the serpent casts its poison in vain. The devils cannot harm a servant of Christ when they see him filled with holy cheerfulness. But when the spirit is teary-eyed, feeling abandoned and sad, it will easily be swallowed up in sorrow, or else be carried away toward empty enjoyment.’ The saint therefore always strove to keep a joyful heart, to preserve the anointing of the spirit and the oil of gladness.”⁴

St. Francis Master: Francis Preaching to the Birds, ca. 1260-1280



An interesting spiritual insight is expressed in *The Assisi Compilation*: “I [Francis] know that the devils envy me because of the gifts which the Lord has granted me in His mercy. Because they cannot harm me through myself, they try to hurt me through my companions. If they cannot do harm either through me or my companions, they withdraw in great confusion. Indeed, whenever I feel tempted and depressed and I look at the joy of my companion, because of that joy I turn away from the temptation and depression and toward inner joy.”⁵

The perfect joy St. Francis speaks about is not “giddiness” or “flightiness.” It is a gift of God, a virtue, a fruit of the Spirit.

Q2. Do I judge “joy” to be the result of everything going my way – all going well and smoothly? How does my idea compare with St. Francis’?

Q3. *Nehemiah (8:10)* recommends: “Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the Lord is your strength!” Describe St. Francis’ approach. How do I rejoice in the Lord in prayer?

According to Bonaventure: “While Francis, the man of God, was making his way through a certain forest, singing with glee praises to the Lord in French, robbers suddenly rushed upon him from an ambush. When they asked who he was, the man of God, filled with confidence, replied in a prophetic voice: ‘I am the herald of the great King!’ But they beat him and threw him into a ditch filled with snow, saying: ‘Lie there, you stupid herald of God!’ After they left, he jumped out of the ditch, and exhilarated with great joy, he began in an even louder voice to make the woods resound with praises to the Creator of all.”⁶

Q4. When I as a Franciscan see the big picture through the perspective we received from St. Francis, how can anything or anyone destroy my joy in the Lord?

¹ FA:ED, *The Undated Writings, True and Perfect Joy*, Vol. 1 pp. 166-167

² FA:ED, *The Assisi Compilation*, 1244-1260, Vol. II, pp. 229-230

³ FA:ED, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, Second Book*, 1245-1247, Vol. II, p. 331, Chapter XCI, v. 128

⁴ Ibid, p. 329, Chapter LXXXVIII, v. 125

⁵ FA:ED, *The Assisi Compilation*, 1244-1260, Vol. II, p. 230

⁶ FA:ED, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, 1260-1263, Vol. II, p. 539, Chapter Two, v. 5