

St Francis praying in front of the Crucifix.

School of Giotto, Upper Basilica of St Francis, Assisi

This scene shows Francis in prayer before the Crucifix; the walls of the church have been 'cut away' by the artist so that we can see everything. The fresco – painted some 700 years ago – has suffered some damage, but we can see that there is an intensity of gaze and of eye contact between Francis and Christ; Francis' hands are in the position indicating surprise and intent listening, and Christ seems almost to be straining forward from the Cross to speak to him. We have a prayer said to have been composed by Francis, to be said before a Crucifix:

Most High,
Glorious God,
Enlighten the darkness of my heart
And give me
True faith'
Certain hope,
And perfect charity,
Sense and knowledge,
Lord,
That I may carry out
Your holy and true command.

This episode marks one of the important milestones in the conversion of St Francis of Assisi. He was a naturally kind, generous and fun-loving young man, whose wealthy father encouraged him in his desire to be a knight, and to win fame and fortune. However, after several false starts Francis realised that this was not the way forward for him. After a period in a military prison following a skirmish with the nearby town, Perugia, Francis realised that, although he was still in his early twenties, his life had been redimensioned forever; the things that had previously given him happiness no longer did, and he began to pray in lonely places, seeking God's will for his life. On such an occasion he was praying in front of a crucifix in the broken old church of San Damiano just outside Assisi when he heard the Crucified Christ address him: 'Go, Francis, and repair my church which is falling into ruin'. At first Francis understood these words in a literal way, and began with his own hands to repair several partially ruined churches in the area – including this one. Then he understood that it was the universal Church and people of God that he was called to build up, and he became an itinerant preacher, sharing the lives of the poor, the sick and those on the margins of society, and telling them that God had come close to them in Christ, who had been born poor and despised, too. Gradually other men wanted to join him in this way of life, and so the Order or Lesser Brothers was born, now better known as Franciscans.

The actual crucifix before which Francis was praying in this episode is still in Assisi, and can be seen in the Basilica of St Clare, the woman who founded a community of Sisters who shared the same vision of a life based on the Gospel as St Francis and his brothers, and who lived in the newly-restored San Damiano. After she died, her Sisters moved up into Assisi and took the Crucifix with them. Both Clare and Francis had a great reverence for Christ, whom they saw as poor and humble and a model for their way of life. His love and humility was seen particularly in his leaving the glory which He shared with His Father and being born on earth for us, and also in his Passion and death.

The depiction of Christ on this cross is unusual; painted in central Italy some 850 years ago and with some strong Byzantine features, the Christ here is both crucified yet alive. His hands and feet and side bear the wounds of the Crucifixion, yet His eyes are open, and He is looking out at the observer intently, inviting a response. He is the 'Christus triumphans', He who has overcome death and is alive and triumphant, no longer wearing a crown of thorns but a golden halo of light. He is the 'Rex gloriae', the King of Glory, enthroned on the Cross which had been a sign of shame but is now the symbol of new life. St John's Gospel indicates that the 'glory' of Jesus was His obedience to the will of His heavenly Father, 'even unto death on a cross'. For Francis, who felt called above all things to as nearly as possible imitate Christ in every way, obedience was fundamental to that call; obedience to his Gospel calling, obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual and the community ('the real Minister General' of his Order) and obedience to the Church.

Francis was a young man whose life experience had caused him to re-evaluate what was important to him. In this episode he interacts with Christ, putting himself at His disposition in loving obedience. It shows that the inner sense of call that Francis feels is met by the loving gaze of Christ, drawing him forward. As Francis gradually understands that it is the universal Church he is called to build up by his preaching and his witness to the reality of God's love and interest in His people and His creation, so he understands that his call was also *for* the Church, to build it up to be an effective witness and sacrament of the love and presence of God amongst His people. It was a call *by* the Church, which needed just such a figure at that moment in its history, and a call to be lived out *within* that Church – difficult though it was at times, with the dispiriting ignorance and corruption that pervaded so much of it.

God is constantly calling His people forward, into ever deeper relationship with Him and with each other. All Christians are called to imitate Christ, to continue His work in His world in our own generation, and to play our part in the life and witness of the Church. The story of St Francis reminds us of the different strands that make up a call, or vocation. There is the inner sense of call, the sense of being called forward by God. Then, importantly, there is the acknowledgement of that call by the Church, and the calling out of ministry from us by the Church community. Our call is not for ourselves; in obedience to God and the Church we may use gifts that we are aware of having, but we may also discover new ones; obedient ministry often takes us out of our comfort zone, and it is then that we realise that we are not working in our own strength alone.

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