



Living Simply

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As Americans, when we speak of living out the Gospel while in the midst of an ecological crisis, we must see that something more radical than recycling and something more profound than a social media post is required. Elizabeth Anne Seton, a formerly wealthy New York socialite, summed up this profound and radical something when she spoke, “Live simply so that others may simply live.” These words were spoken nearly half a century before the American Industrial Revolution began in earnest. However, they resonate even more today because American society is only beginning to come to terms with the costly externalities of our addictive consumption.

How is my consumption addictive? How do my inner thoughts affect my external environment? How can a change in behavior toward created things manage to change core beliefs? How can the conversion of one life stem the overwhelming tide of climate change? How can an 800 year old Franciscan Christian tradition address the dilemmas of a 21st century individual? How?

Of all the profound and subtle distinctions of St. Francis of Assisi, it is this key distinction that is fundamental to an understanding of the Franciscan lifestyle: Francis was a mystic AND a Gospel literalist. In the Gospel, when Jesus commissioned his disciples, Jesus said

“As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give. Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for

the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, look for a worthy person in it, and stay there until you leave. As you enter a house, wish it peace. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; if not, let your peace return to you” (Mt 10:7-10).

In a Franciscan reading of just this passage, Jesus is literally giving directions to his disciple about how to live the simplest life, a life dependent upon the Gospel. In our lives steeped in 21st century secular culture, it may be difficult to imagine how we could follow this commission to the letter, and that is understandable. However, Francis had a special imagination, and that is why many believe he is the saint whose life most closely imitated Jesus’.

This is the essence of Franciscan simple living: Imagining how our life can imitate Jesus’ life in our day and age and living it with a minimal dependence upon material things and a maximal interdependence upon each other. Here are some key simple living elements from the passage:

1. All creatures bear the imprint of God – The radical reorientation that comes from seeing God in all of creation is fundamental to Franciscan simple living. When Jesus said “The kingdom of God is at hand” Francis saw God’s kingdom as a tangible reality in the here and now, and not some abstract or otherworldly realm. In fact, this is evidenced by the affection he expressed toward animate and inanimate creatures in his Cantic of the Creatures. When we revere our environment, we consider every act of harm we do to

the environment as an affront to God and every act of care towards the environment as a sharing in the love between God (the Creator) and us (the creatures).

2. A proper spirit of detachment from material possessions – Franciscan simple living is an experience of what happens when we reprioritize means and ends in our lives. When Jesus tells his disciples to forsake all the possessions they have come to see as means to survival, he is not telling them to ascetically give up care for themselves as an end in itself. The Grace of God is the end that Jesus is asking them to seek instead. The message is that the Grace of God may be received by means of miraculous healings or sustaining comforts. If God's Grace comes at no cost, what cost is fair to charge for it? Addictive consumption says that one's possessions are ends in themselves. It is this unconscious desire for created means that fuels overproduction and a costly depletion of the Earth's resources. When we desire God above all else, we need consume no more Grace (by whatever means) than is necessary. We share abundance; we do not hoard it.

3. Solidarity with the poor – In order to experience the life of the poor, Francis gave up his wealthy inheritance and sought the virtue of living at a level equal to the poor. A life of poverty need not be a life of impoverishment, as Jesus reflects in his statement, "The laborer deserves his keep." Although God's grace is and has always been free, many believe that only material wealth distribution ought to be merit based. Living the Gospel in the 21st century requires us to consider whether our actions encourage material wealth to be distributed with justice. If we believe that slave labor is unjust, we must consider, for example, whether it is just to purchase additional cheap goods from companies that we suspect do not implement fair labor practices. Living in solidarity with the poor requires us to reexamine how our competition for material wealth has left our poor brothers and sisters impoverished. It seems necessary to mention that for Francis, the poor likely extended to animate AND inanimate creatures. Trees labor tirelessly to give us the oxygen we need to survive. Living a simple life is living a life of universal kinship.

4. Living in a house of peace – God gave Francis his own commission, "Go repair my house, which as you see has fallen into ruin." Amid the rampant corruption of the medieval institutional Church, Francis saw the Church as a worthy house. To his credit at the time, Pope Innocent III was able to see that a small peasant from Assisi might have been the only person in Italy capable of preventing the house from collapsing. In 800 years, the three Franciscan Orders have never left the housing of the institutional Church. It is important to remember, when reflecting on the Gospel, that Jesus taught that the inhabitant

and the enclosure are both houses of peace. Throughout his short life, Francis sought to become an instrument of peace, yet he never quite came to full realization of the Wisdom of the teaching until he was blind and broken down. Cultivating an interior and exterior house of peace is a daily dance of coming upon and returning, repairing and ruining, inhaling wisdom and then exhaling compassion. The peace of God's kingdom is already at hand, flowing out of us as a gift and surrounding us if we wish it in our midst. Twenty-first century living often seems to encourage the accumulation of so many intellectual and material possessions. We attach our identity to them and in time they come to possess us, polluting our environment from within and from without. This is the spirit of the Beatitudes. If we only make space, God's Spirit passes through us, making all things new.

5. Worthiness is not earned, it is experienced – Francis once stated, "I have been all things unholy; if God can work through me, He can work through anyone." He admitted to trying on all manner of unholy identities to rid himself of worthiness in the eyes of God. He realized that it didn't matter for him or anyone else — God could still use him. Simple living can indeed be quite simple, especially when we come to understand that God is the one doing good work through us. The worthy people Jesus is referring to in the Gospel are none other than those humble few who have experienced their own self-worth. These are the ones who know what abundance they still have when all their material possessions have been given away. This is what Jesus means when he instructs his disciples to give from their poverty and not from their wealth (Mk 12:44). Franciscan simple living is above all an exercise in gratefulness for the simple gifts we have received in life and the capacity to take part in the experience of giving to others. We believe we are all gifts from God, so debating which of God's gifts is more worthy of His esteem seems quite silly. Humility (i.e., experiencing all that one is and all that one is not) is perhaps then the key to simple living and frees us of the need to compete with each other for anything. Gradually, through prayer and life experience, we will realize that all excessive consumption is profoundly rooted in a blind sense of unworthiness.

For more information:

Franciscan Action Network and Franciscan Earth Corps
<http://franciscanaction.org/earthcorps>

