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After Jesus’ baptism, Jesus *“filled with the power of the Spirit,”* returns to His hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. The importance of this moment is highlighted by its dramatic rendering. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet is handed to Him. He searches the words and finds the Spirit-driven mission language of Isaiah. He appropriates them to His ministry which evoke sentiments of hope. Wherever human life is impoverished, imprisoned, impaired, it will become enriched, free, and enabled. All this will be done by the power of divine favor. This moment is a call to transformative action.

*“The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me;*

*he has sent me to announce good news to the poor,*

*to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim a year of the Lord’s favor.”*

This is Jesus’ inaugural speech, announcing that the divine action is now moving from promise to action. It’s a word of hope to a hopeless situation. With Jesus as teacher, the entire synagogue is focused on Him. Jesus tells them that the promise has been fulfilled. The waiting is over. Jesus speaks the words. The people heard them. The words were no longer words of prediction. They were words of inauguration. *“The Kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Come Lord, and open in us, the gates of your Kingdom.”*

Jesus returns to His hometown, to sights and sounds of boyhood memories, as the son of Mary and Joseph. But something happened at His baptism. He was *“filled with the power of the Spirit.”* Jesus had experienced God: the heavens were opened, a dove descended, and a voice was heard. Jesus, son of Mary, comes as the Son of God.

We see a similar movement in the life of St Francis. He said, *“The Lord Himself led me.”* This movement from bitterness to sweetness is both perplexing and profound. Here we begin to see a shift in Francis’ form of life, the process of his conversion. In 2002 the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote an essay titled The Contemplation of Beauty: *“The beauty of Truth appears in him, the beauty of God Himself who draws us to Himself and, at the same time captures us with the wound of Love, the holy passion that enables us to go forth…to meet the Love who calls us.”*

The Orthodox saint and theologian Nicholas teaches that “it is knowing that causes love and gives birth to it.” Concerned with the effects of the washing of baptism on those that have loved to the very end, he asks *“what is the cause of their love, what did they experience to make them love in this way, and whence they received the fire of love? When one has a longing so great that it surpasses human nature and eager desire, and are able to accomplish things beyond human thought, it is the Bridegroom who has smitten them with this longing. It is He who has sent a ray of His beauty into their eyes. The greatness of the wound shows the dart which has struck home, the longing indicates who has inflicted the wound.”*

Thinking of the icon of the Cross of San Damiano, so important to Francis, comes to mind. Cardinal Ratzinger says that what is required when praying before the image is an *“inner perception”* that frees itself *“from the impression of the merely sensible. Prayer and ascetical effort acquires a new and deeper capacity to see.”*  This inner way, inwardly purified and interiorly transformed, is a path toward both beauty and truth. With this enriched perception, we are able to more fully recognize the *“glory of God.”* In Christ’s passion, *“the experience of the beautiful has received new depth and new realism. In the face of the Crucified appears the genuine, extreme beauty—the beauty of love that goes to the very end.”*

Prior to his conversion, Francis set his eyes on knightly glory gained in battle, and all the fame that would come with it. A pivotal period in his life was his being imprisoned after a disastrous battle with the neighboring town of Perugia. Another experience of transition and conversion. It was only then—beaten, a prisoner, suffering—that Francis began to think of Christianity in a new way. After having been released from prison, confused and disoriented, it became possible for him to hear the voice of the Crucified who spoke to him. Thomas of Celano records Francis is reoriented before the Cross in the crumbling chapel of San Damiano, and in the experience of mercy in his encounter with the lepers. Celano says Francis *“was filled with a wonderful and unspeakable love owing to his love of God.”*

“Christ on the cross bows His head waiting for you,” says St Bonaventure, “that He may kiss you; He stretched out His arms, that He may embrace you; His hands are open that he may enrich you; His body is spread out, that He may give Himself totally; His feet are nailed, that He may stay there; His side is open for you that He may let you enter there.”

Christ *“appears the genuine, extreme beauty—the beauty of love that goes to the very end.”* He is there with eyes open, with a slight smile on His face. His head is haloed, above it we see Christ ascending to the glory of paradise. Even though blood issues from His hands, feet, and side, He is triumphal, crowned not with thorns, but gold. The sufferings are framed by the glories of the Resurrection and Ascension. The Cross is seen not as ugliness and woe, but the fullest expression of divine goodness.

Francis’ life was imprinted by this cruciform narrative. It is from this Cross that we hear Christ speak. The wounds depicted there Francis himself would bear, an embodied sign, external and within, of Francis’ conformity to the Crucified. Before this Cross, Francis sees his mission.

** When we stop to pray before the Cross of the Christ of San Damiano with our gaze fixed on His pierced side, He invites us to enter there and experience the joy of knowing that we are loved, and having the desire to love, we make of ourselves instruments of mercy and reconciliation.