

Giovanni Francesco Bernadone a “Proto-Protestant” Reformer

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“I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceeding few are the exceptions,) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. ...So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.”

-Rev. John Wesley (Wesley, 1827, p. 150)

The previous quotation from Wesley, resembles Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 3:5, which reminds us that often, the church emulates its social and cultural surroundings, rather than the example of its founder, as it seems to do today, here, and the world over. It’s nothing new. And, such was the state of the Catholic Church in 1182, at the birth, and throughout the life of an unlikely reformer, Giovanni Francesco Bernadone, from Assisi Italy, more popularly known as Francis of Assisi (Holl, 1980, p. 43). Before proceeding in a fashion that one would expect, which would be to immediately cover the state of the church at the time of Francis, or give his biography, I would like to assert that it will not be presented in this short paper. Instead, let us evaluate his actions in regard to the society and culture of his time and in relation to the state of the Catholic Church, and then weigh the results.

Most everyone, at least in religious circles, and in many secular realms, has heard of Francis in one way or another. His life story is short and can be read in a brief summary. That is why I chose not to cover his life, which so many others have done so well, but to extract reliable accounts of incidents from his life and quotes, from his most trustworthy biographies, that would shed a greater light on his theology and its impact on the world. It is my goal to evaluate what others thought of him at the time and what they report that he said and did, in order to shine a light on select items to make a case regarding my view of him as a protestant style

reformer. I have no doubt he was a reformer. Though some people view him as harmless, and others are ambivalent regarding his contributions, the Catholic Church of the time thought he was quite a dangerous threat (Holl, 1980, pp. 6-7, 9-11).

In keeping with the varying views regarding Francis, there are many representations of his work and what he actually was. For instance, I called him a reformer. Those who would question my inclination to do so as protestant bias, can check the short bibliography to be assured that I used almost only Catholic publications, writers and theologians. Most are reprinted quotes from Thomas Celano’s biographies and the writings of Brother Leo, men with first-hand knowledge of Francis. Some refer to him as an eccentric (almost insane), pacifist, mystical simpleton, who loved wildlife, wasting his breath preaching to the wind and animals (Holt, 1993, pp. 61-62). There are those who call him a good Catholic, doing great personal penance, sometimes embodying the miraculous, but having no desire to question the church (Delaney, 1980, pp. 234-35; Vorreaux, 1979, pp. 8-14). Still others would label him as a great reformer that was thwarted by a corrupt church (Holl, 1980, pp. 12-13; Leclerc, 1983, pp. 99-104). Some, have made him a socialist, branding him the “poster boy” for whatever form of socio-political endeavor they are endorsing (Holl, 1980, pp. 14-15, 68, 70-71).

The problem with studying Francis rests in the fact that he never wrote anything, except his *Rules, Admonitions, Testament* and a few letters, which perhaps were written, or at least edited, by someone else, as we will see later (Francis of Assisi, 1905, p. xvi). That creates an interpretational problem in my opinion. Regardless of this problem, just as it is with Jesus who he tries to emulate, I believe we can choose the most reliable sources to see who he truly was

and what he actually believed through the words of those who best knew him. After studying him briefly, I believe he was a bit of all the aforementioned things, some consciously, others unconsciously. But, primarily, I believe he was a great reformer with a bent similar to some notable Protestants who came after him, but his achievements were diminished and his motives reinterpreted by the astonishingly modern propaganda machine of the Catholic Church of that day (Holl, 1980, p. 8).

After reading through his biographies and weighing the facts regarding his background and upbringing, I have much reservation in referring to him as a simpleton, or blind mystic. In my readings, the authors Holt, Delaney and Dunlap have conveyed this view without what I would consider genuine analysis. Therefore, since there are not many truly critical Catholic sources, new or old, I will be primarily using the two remaining, very systematic, rational sources which I consulted, written by Catholic theologians, Holl and Leclerc. To be honest, Holl’s relationship with the Catholic Church is strained to say the least, but he is a brilliant man who was a university lecturer in Catholic theology and priest at the University of Vienna (The University of Vienna, n.d.). Leclerc, on the other hand is in good standing. He was given the “Nihil Obstat” and “Imprimatur” officially guaranteeing his work free from doctrinal error. In other words, three Catholic Church officials censored it. It is the Catholic “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” as it were. Seeing that was the case, I was surprised so much clear theological criticism came through and much that complements Holl’s viewpoints.

Having stated my intentions, let us continue.

Francis, was a wealthy young man who chose to give up all he owned, to be a poor, wandering preacher who lived by Christ's example. The Gospel of Matthew was his first clear motivator, especially chapter ten, verses 7 to 10, which became his prime directive. It states:

"As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011)."

However, I believe that Francis adhered as much to the part of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, exhorting disciples of Christ to be as "wise as serpents and harmless as doves," as he did to the rest of that message, which struck him as his calling in his chosen mission of poverty, preaching the gospel and literal emulation of the suffering savior. This was a complete opposite to the militarily victorious, conquering Jesus of nobility, presented by the church of the middle ages, which Martin Luther later called a theology of glory, which ran contrary to the bible's explicit theology of the cross (Holl, 1980, pp. 65, 67). Francis must have seen this contradiction, because he chose his path of poverty, rather than the one set forth by the church of that day. Being wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove, he sought the approval of the church. He never questioned its authority, but almost always ignored it (Holl, 1980, pp. 61-63; Leclerc, 1983, p. 52). He knew what the church was capable of, especially later in life, after personally witnessing the violence and brutality of a crusade and the executions of other more radical mendicants, such as the Lombards and Waldensians (Holl, 1980, pp. 160, 165).

As a wealthy merchant class bourgeois, he was, after all, fairly well educated in many subjects, as well as a bit of Latin, meaning he could most likely read scripture, if given the opportunity, and early in life had proven himself to be a deft business man (Leclerc, 1983, pp.

22, 24). Unfortunately, at the time, the church had a monopoly on scripture (Holl, 1980, p. 64; Vorreaux, 1979, p. 12). One single book carried the cost equivalence of an entire, well provisioned dairy farm. A bible was not readily available to any but the wealthiest of men. The Catholic Church controlled who saw and interpreted scripture, since only they could afford to equip their churches with such an expensive provision (Holl, 1980, p. 26).

The church’s clerics, if they were trained and hadn’t purchased their office, either read, dictated, or translated the gospels to the wealthy, as they did for Francis’ persecuted predecessor in poverty, Peter Waldo. Waldo purchased translations, read them, interpreted them and chose to oppose the church. He was a marked man (Holl, 1983, pp. 76-78; Leclerc, 1983, p. 66). Francis too, having been wealthy like Waldo, might have paid for translations, but, his father, Pietro Bernadone, owning the family business most likely to have been inherited by Francis, held the purse strings (Dunlap, 1996, p. 32). Pietro, who was most likely converted to Cathar during his many merchant trips to France, was willing to pay for all sorts of carousing and vice, on his son’s behalf, but never for Godly endeavors (Holl, 1980, p. 44; Leclerc, 1983, pp. 36-37).

Instead, Francis sought the reading of scriptures through friendly conversations with the clergy, while quietly rejecting doctrine (Holl, 1980, pp. 53, 80). He was a quiet heretic. Of course at that time, anyone guilty of independent thought was considered a heretic by the church.

“For all his lifelong politeness to the clergy, Francis never wanted to be a priest. He meant his fellowship to be made up of laypeople, and to be legitimized by a Christ-like way of life, not by Holy Orders and the study of theology. ...And that on all the critical questions concerning his

chosen way of life he always appealed directly to God and the Bible, never to any churchly rules or traditions (Holl, 1980, p. 28)."

This begins to take on the appearance of a protestant ethic, along with a dose of civil disobedience (Holl, 1980, pp. 53, 60, 85-86). This description embodies all the greatest characteristics of Protestantism, but most of all, resembles Luther's assertion of 'Sola Scriptura,' that only scripture carried the authority of God himself. We can also interpret this in a way that makes Francis' organization of laypeople to resemble Luther's priesthood of believers.

In further emulation of a protestant behavior, Francis courageously preached to the Pope and his Cardinals, not to Innocent III who gave him permission to preach, but to his successor, Honorius III. This was a blatant confrontation regarding the Church's corruption and poor example. He translated a Psalm from Latin into his Umbrian dialect, the language of an "idiot." It said: "All the day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face (Holl, 1980, pp. 121-122). What courage! It's similar to Luther's nailing of the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, but this was truly audacious. It was a face to face reprimand of Christ's infallible Vicar on Earth. Rejection of the Pope's authority is a protestant ideal, but just as importantly, so is the bible translated into the vernacular to be used and understood by the common man.

Francis was a sincere individual, who truly wanted to change the church and society at large using the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Leclerc, 1983, pp. 49, 52-53, 83, 99-104). He made a statement to this same effect in his own very short autobiographical Testament. It reads like this. "And after the Lord gave me brothers no one showed me what I ought to do, but the Most High himself revealed to me that I ought to live according to the pattern of the Holy

Gospel (Holl, 1980, p. 80; Leclerc, 1983, p. 57; Dunlap, 1996, p. 45).” What could be more protestant in nature than, not only reading scripture, but receiving personal revelation, and also interpreting these things without church tradition or clerical intervention?

This protestant spirit was also apparent on an occasion when his order had grown so large, that thousands of converted brothers flooded Portiuncula, which in translation means Church of the Little Portion, a crumbling chapel which was rebuilt by Francis. He had heard his first call to follow his prime directive there, and at every Pentecost, from 1210 A.D. until his death, an annual meeting was held there to discuss the past year’s accomplishments and plans for the coming year (Dunlap, 1996, p. 59). He was asked by Peter of Catania, a lawyer who had given up all to follow, to store provisions and money as a hedge against the needs of the rapidly growing new group. This went against Francis’ adherence to the Gospel’s orders to live day to day with no currency, as is stated in Matthew chapter 10 and Luke 12. His response was that of an iconoclast. His exact words were: “...Dearest brother, far be it from us to love one another in this way. Instead, remove the precious ornaments from the altar of our church, if you cannot help the needy in any other way. Believe me, the mother of God would rather have us observe the gospel of her son and rob the altar than leave her altar adorned but despise her son (Holl, 1980, p. 73).”

Another notable quote appealing to the sovereignty of Scriptures above all else was his advice to a wealthy friend seeking to follow in the same literal interpretation of poverty and itinerant evangelism. The quoted reply was: “If you want to attest your words with your deeds, then let’s go to church tomorrow morning, open up the Gospel, and get advice from Christ (Holl,

1983, p. 79).” Appealing directly to Christ through the scriptures is characteristic of Protestant thought. Thus far everything we have witnessed is protestant in nature. The only thing missing here is salvation by grace and the forgiveness of sin.

But, if we look closely again at his biography, much to our surprise there is evidence of a grave burden about forgiveness of sin and salvation in Francis, much like that of Martin Luther (Holl, 1980, p. 114). He too, like Luther, found a resolution in grace through faith (Leclerc, 1983, p. 73). It appears that to Francis and Luther faith was primary to reason (Holl, 1980, p. 141). And if we consult a reprinted section of his official biography, which is sanctioned by the church, we see he did have a spiritual awakening to grace. It is contained in this description.

“One day, when Francis was marveling at the mercy shown him by God in his many blessings and he wished to know what form his and his brothers’ way of life should take henceforth, he sought a place to pray in as was his custom. As he continued to stand there with fear and trembling before the master of the whole world, and in bitterness of his soul thought over the years he had spent in such wickedness, he repeated again and again the phrase, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” Then unspeakable joy and the greatest delight slowly began to pour into his innermost heart. Step by step he became completely changed. The storm in his soul abated, the darkness fled, which had spread over his soul from his fear of sin. He was granted the certainty that all his sins had been forgiven, and the confidence that he would come to grace awakened in him again. Thereupon he fell into ecstasy and was entirely immersed in a flood of light. The power of his spirit enlarged and he saw in the light what the future would bring. When at last that bliss had disappeared, along with the light, he was spiritually renewed and transformed into another man (Holl, 1980, p. 110).”

Essentially we have the picture emerging of an early protestant in mendicant clothing. He questioned the Pope. He appealed directly to scripture for his authority to behave without the church’s permission or interpretation. He bypassed the priest and communicated with God directly for revelation and forgiveness of sin. He would have removed the idols from the church. He opted for a brotherhood of laypeople that resembled Luther’s priesthood of believers rather than professional theologians. In many ways his conclusions resembled Luther’s. But

interestingly enough, it appears to me that he demonstrated qualities of early Anabaptists. He promoted his faith through living by example. He believed strongly in charity. And, he was obviously an egalitarian, since he even accepted a woman, Clare, into his group of laypeople. No wonder the church feared him.

Therefore, we can see, much by the actions and words of Francis, that he befriended the church for his legitimization among the population, his group’s safety from persecution, access to the scriptures, and the hope that he might transform the church from within and without to an early form of Christian worship. He was not the only one seeking to return to the worship of the early church. All of the other so called ‘heretical’ groups of the time were doing the same, but were doing so through opposing the church, which meant certain failure (Leclerc, 1983, p. 46; Vorreaux, 1979, p. 8). I believe that being as shrewd as the gospel instructed, Francis identified this problem, and that is the reason why he courted the support of the Catholic Church. But why then did the church need Francis? The Catholic Church, being wise as serpents, but not necessarily gentle as doves, tolerated him for their own reasons, which are as follows.

The Catholic Church and society in general during this period were going through enormous changes. The church had become wealthy and politically powerful from a land based feudal economy. In essence, the church had become a carnal institution. It was a monopolistic form of government and economic system in its own right. Because of this, there had been no widespread trade or growth outside of the church’s authority for hundreds of years. Under this system and due to the obeisance of Kings, Nobles and Lords, there was little or no movement of

people or goods over distances. People were attached to their property, and most government owed its ultimate allegiance to the Catholic Church. Much of this was owed to the ‘*manus mortuus*,’ or, the ‘dead hand’ of the church, which had taken up large tracts of land.

Approximately two-thirds of all the land in Europe belonged to the Catholic Church. This meant that it was purchased by the church and put under mortmain—the withdrawal from all future sales (Holl, 1980, p. 25) . Some of the land was used as economic and political leverage, and much of this land was used for monasteries, which were the only center of learning, another way in which the church held ultimate control over hearts and minds. But, these monasteries also produced great wealth from the frugal, productive, ascetic lifestyle of the inhabiting monks. All of this gave the church an unparalleled and powerful monopoly in all realms, economic, political and educational. Since under this system land was the ultimate measure of wealth, there was little use for currency. The final result was a population under complete control of the church with very little freedom or individuality (Leclerc, 1983, pp. 41-43).

However, a slowly evolving social and economic revolution, which would eventually lead to the renaissance, was emerging. A class of merchants, little by little, embarked on traveling between manors and fiefs, trading, not only goods but ideas, and amassing great wealth. The nobles and church looked down on them with fear, because their growing wealth had become a source of power that threatened to undo their monopoly on government and economic strength. Rather than relying on land as a measure of wealth, they began to trade in currency and precious metals for goods. With their wealth came revolts that displaced landed

aristocracy and the seizure of Church lands uprooted the old social, political and economic stranglehold. The church was losing control (Leclerc, 1983, pp. 43-44; Vorreaux, 1979, pp. 3-4).

Soon the towns built by these emerging powerbrokers, called 'communes' or 'bourgeois,' formed their own governments ruled by the wealthiest merchants, thereby displacing the nobility. Each town organized its own militia or purchased protection from mercenary nobles and knights who had been similarly displaced. This not only troubled the remaining nobility, which was being annihilated by mercenaries from within its own ranks and being replaced by a new aristocracy, but it also troubled the Catholic Church, which was accustomed to complete obeisance and allegiance from the nobility. Individuality was on the increase and this not only affected politics and markets, but education and religion, which heretofore had been the sole domain of the Catholic Church (Leclerc, 1983, p. 45; Vorreaux, 1979, pp. 4-6).

The consequences of all this upheaval resulted in a clash between the Church and the new bourgeois ruling class. The new aristocrats lost respect for the church because of its corruption. The common man, who was promised a better life as a result of fighting for a new order, lost respect for both the church and the emerging governments, because he didn't receive the care that was due him under either system and he was worse off than he had been as a serf. Resultantly, there was a mass exodus from the Catholic Church. The populace in its new found personal freedom saw fit to think and interpret for itself. All sorts of groups, referred to as 'heretical' by the church began forming. These groups hoped to recreate an authentic replica of the early church (Leclerc, 1983, pp. 46-47).

The Catholic Church was desperate to find a way to bring the poor back into its fold. I believe this is where Francis came into the picture. This is why he was allowed to preach and operate *carte blanche*, without a formal rule for his brotherhood. Not only was he a man who rejected the wealth and trappings of power of a bourgeois family, but now that he was indigent, he would be very useful to the church in appearing concerned about the poor. To me, it seems the perfect reason for the church to give a stay of execution to a rebellious mendicant that would otherwise have been excommunicated and summarily executed, as were all the others like him in that day. The Catholic Church needed his legendary persona and his popularity, as much as he needed the Church's license to survive, while on his mission of carrying out Christ's commission to evangelize the gospels in a fashion that ran contrary to all Catholic methods (Leclerc, 47-49).

"Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? -James 2: 2-5 (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011)."

If anyone were to have tasted both sides of this Scripture selection, it would have been Francis. He was a wealthy, spoiled brat in his first 22 years of life. He probably knew how it felt to be treated as something special, just because of his wealth, with no other good cause. It was exactly that lack of cause, the emptiness from it, and the accompanying guilt, along with the calls of the Holy Spirit, that affected him to slowly embrace a spiritual change spanning from 1204-1208 A.D. That change triggered him to give up all possessions and follow the life of poverty, pacifism, charity and evangelization. It's strikingly similar to the story of Siddhartha

Gautama (Buddha). In any case, he learned to be berated as a beggar, simpleton and a madman. He was considered a madman for 3 years until the Pope gave him license to preach in 1208 A.D. (Leclerc, 1983, pp. 29-36).

From that date, he began attracting thousands of followers. He instructed many on how to live in total commitment to Christ, in a literal sense. His preaching was said to have been incredibly persuasive. It was not lofty or learned, but pragmatic and he entranced the 'popolo minuto' or common people. He preached repentance, peace, generosity, and warned of hell. His speaking was also greatly respected by many wealthy nobles and some of the educated (Holl, 1980, pp. 65-68). He wished no order or rules for his group, other than the ones expounded in the Gospels in something akin to a protestant style. He got his wish until 1219 A.D., when Cardinal Ugolino, who was destined to become Pope himself, replaced Francis as leader of his own movement. Under direct orders from Pope Honorius III, Ugolino was instructed to reign in the unruly brotherhood and transform it into an organized, official church order. The church had found its mechanism and was regaining control over it. Who better to be the next Pope, other than one who appeared to come from the ranks of the common man, one who could wield that power to reign in an unruly poor and merchant class via this new means of control and appeal?

In 1220, the church commanded Francis, by means of a papal bull, to create a rule and novitiate for his brotherhood. Francis knew he was no match for the power and bureaucracy of the church and made a conscious decision not to put his brothers who had trusted him in harm's way by spurning the church. So, he gave in to the wishes of the 'Holy See.' He was

forced to make a rule which he submitted in 1221 A.D. However, it was so lax, that in essence it mirrored his original ‘no-rule-but-the-gospel’ tenet and it was summarily rejected. At that point, having seen his life’s work in shambles, he was a broken man, who was in poor health. Two years later, in 1223 A.D., a rule was procured, though much of it was not in his own handwriting. Pope Honorius III approved it officially (Leclerc. 1983, pp. 88-89, 93-97, 100-102; Holl, 1980, pp. 6, 7, 126, 151, 160-161, 162-164).

At this point, Francis had been transformed into a mere figurehead and had retired into contemplation, which was out of character for such an extraordinary man of action. He died in October of 1226 A.D. The church had successfully regained popularity with the poor for a time and had triumphed again. Upon the death of Honorius III in 1227 A.D., the Cardinal who had silenced Francis, Ugolino, ascended the papal throne as Gregory IX. In 1228 A.D. Gregory IX canonized Francis for popularity. Then, in 1230 A.D., he decreed that the Testament of Francis was null and void, at the same time declaring the rule against accepting money could be circumnavigated by allowing friars to draw checks on an account without touching money, which was a mere technicality. To finalize matters, in 1233 A.D. he codified the Inquisition’s procedure against heretics, which meant that no more like Francis would appear with such force (Holl, 1980, pp. 7-8, 219).

Still into the early fourteenth century there were battles between the “spirituals” and the “conventuals” in the order. Many of the idealistic spirituals suffered for their beliefs in the idealism of Christ and Francis, even going to the stake (Holl, 1980, pp. 228-229). In A.D. 1323, for the purpose of quelling the disturbance, a papal bull was introduced that made it heresy to

declare that Christ and the Apostles never owned property, and further, that the Redeemer and his Apostles did not enjoy the right of selling or giving away belongings. “And the ideal pattern of Christ traveling about with his Apostles, owning nothing, not even knowing where he would sleep the following night, was once and for all declared illicit by Christ’s vicar on earth (Holl, 1980, p. 234).” Fortunately, many spirituals still quietly exist. There is a joke afoot that even God still does not know where the Franciscans get all of their money.

So must we say that Francis failed? I do not believe that is the case. In summation of everything covered, regardless of the actions to silence the true Francis, repercussions can still be felt today in and out of the Catholic Church. He may have been diluted, but his influence can still be seen in those seeking a literal Christ-like existence. He also may have given impetus to the continued survival of the Waldesians, by supplying what I have interpreted as nascent protestant beliefs. Perhaps his early version of ‘sola scriptura’ and his primitive form of salvation by grace, may have been one of the forces that kept the longing for change so alive in the church that it resulted in a like spirit such as Luther to move forward toward a reformation. Furthermore, maybe through his promotion of egalitarian ideals and of living by example, he indirectly influenced the Anabaptist movement.

Finally, if we consider the possibility of living a life of complete faith in this world, as Francis and his brothers did, as impossible, perhaps we should consult the scriptures and Christ’s question at the last supper, regarding the instructions, which he issued to his disciples, and indirectly to Francis, in Matthew the tenth chapter. Luke the twenty second chapter, verse thirty-five issues a rejoinder to our doubts by stating: “Then Jesus asked them, ‘When I sent you

without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?’ ‘Nothing,’ they answered (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011).”

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