

*“In every age, great Christian saints have cultivated their life with God using the writings of Scripture, the theological reflections of others, the capacities of human reason, the cultural resources of the day and the spiritual disciplines. Through their reflections, the great saints witness to the work of the Holy Spirit and, when we study them, guide our spiritual life as well.”*

Richard J. Foster and Gayle D. Beebe, *Longing for God: Seven Paths of Christian Devotion*

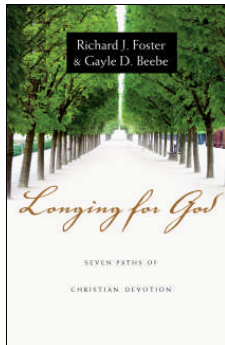
I stood with my friend Dallas Willard in Santa Croce, the famous Franciscan church in Florence, Italy. Only a short walk away was the magnificent Duomo cathedral, the de facto center of Florence. The two churches are a contrast in extremes. Both are magnificent but in different ways.

I was puzzling over the mass of tombstones in Santa Croce. The walls are lined with tombs and the floor is paved with some 276 tombstones. Some of the most famous names in Italian history are inscribed there—Michelangelo, Galileo, Dante, Machiavelli, Rossini and more. I wasn’t surprised at the tombs—they are commonplace in medieval churches. What surprised me was that so many prominent figures were buried here and not at the Duomo, which by all accounts is far more impressive and important in the scheme of things. “Why?” I asked. “Why would all these renowned people choose to be buried here and not at the cathedral?”

“Well,” Dallas replied with his characteristic wisdom, “it was because of the extraordinary holiness of Francis and the Franciscan friars that came here. Their power resided in their holiness. Even a hundred years later that holiness still filled the place. It drew people by the thousands and they wanted to be near such uncommon holiness, even in death.” Standing there in Santa Croce, I felt it too. I had been in innumerable European churches, large and small, but here in Santa Croce it was as if the very air was still scented by the quiet, peace-filled holiness of those Friars Minor.

And it is this holiness that has continued to draw millions to the “little brother of Assisi” over the almost eight centuries since. It is what draws me, this holiness of life. It is a holiness that is revealed in passionate devotion, in radical simplicity, in joyful humility.

In Francis of Assisi we see passionate devotion. A story is told of the Lord Bernard of Assisi, one of the richest and wisest noblemen in the city. He had watched Francis for two years and was deeply impressed by how he could endure all the ridicule and abuse with such patience and serenity. Hoping to learn the heart of his spirituality, he determined “to put St. Francis’ holiness to a test.” He invited Francis to supper and to stay the night. He had a bed prepared in his own room, in which a lamp was always kept burning. Francis, wanting to “conceal the divine graces which he had,” climbed into the bed and pretended to fall asleep. Lord Bernard, it seems, was better at this game and “he pretended to be sleeping soundly, and he began to snore loudly.”



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Francis, believing that Bernard was fast asleep, arose and knelt by the window and began praying with “intense fervor and devotion,” saying, “My God and my all!” All through the night he continued this way with “intense fervor and devotion,” sobbing out the words with “many tears” and saying only, “My God and my all! My God and my all!” Lord Bernard, watching the whole scene from his bed, was “touched by the Holy Spirit in the depths of his heart.” When morning came Bernard declared, “Brother Francis, I have definitively resolved in my heart to leave the world and to follow you in whatever you order me to do.” Passionate devotion.

In Francis of Assisi we see radical simplicity. Illness and a military disappointment were among the influences that led the sensitive Francis through a lengthy series of intense struggles of the spirit, climaxing in 1206 when his enraged father brought him before the bishop to disinherit him. Francis stripped himself naked and walked away, determined to follow the Lord’s bidding into apostolic poverty.

In Francis of Assisi we see joyful humility. Francis called his humble band “God’s jugglers,” whose task was to “revive the hearts of men and lead them into spiritual joy.” Paul Sabatier wrote of Francis, “Perfectly happy, he felt himself more and more impelled to bring others to share his happiness and to proclaim in the four corners of the world how he had attained it.” And away he went, traversing much of Italy, preaching to the sultan in Egypt and engaging in ministry among Muslim peoples. His “Friars Minor” (little friars or little brothers) fanned out over Europe and beyond.

They not only preached, but also sang. Exuberant and joyful, they were often caught up in ecstasy as they worshiped. With the soul of a poet, Francis would improvise their hymns. Best known is his “Canticle of the Sun,” with its celebration of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wind and Sister Water. Francis and his Friars Minor knew the joy of the Lord. They were stamped by simple love and joyous trust. They led a cheerful, happy revolt against the spirit of materialism and double-mindedness. Joyful humility.

Paraphrased from chapter 4, “Path Four: Intimacy with Jesus Christ,”  
“Francis of Assisi: The World as Our Cloister”