

Article

“Do Not Extinguish the Spirit of Prayer” The Act of Prayer According to Francis of Assisi

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Abstract: Francis of Assisi did not shape a systematic tractate about prayer and contemplation. He was first of all a Man of Prayer and secondly a Master of Prayer. This article tries to work out some mainlines of St. Francis’ practice of prayer based on a small selection of his writings. Despite an incomparable situation of spirituality, society, and lifestyle between the 13th century and today, it is possible to figure out some persistent elements of what it means “to pray”: acclamation to and dialogue with the ineffable God; the logic of donation and restitution; the relevance of identity and universal solidarity in prayer; the relation between prayer and action or the meaning of “unceasing prayer”. The spiritual practice of Francis of Assisi may help us to approach and to understand the human act of prayer, which is no longer self-evident—and probably never was.

Keywords: prayer; contemplation; Francis of Assisi; spirituality

1. Introduction: “Francis of Assisi Becoming Totally Prayer”

To talking about Franciscan spirituality, one must undoubtedly talk about the Franciscan idea and practice of prayer—as in any spiritual tradition in the world, any sort of practical and explicit orientation towards God (or “the Holy”, “the divinity”) represents an example of what we traditionally call “prayer”.

In order to outline the meaning of Franciscan prayer, the easiest and the most evident way is to look at Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/82–1224) himself. His first biographer, Thomas of Celano (+1260), wrote the notable remark about Francis that he was “not so much praying as becoming totally prayer” (FA:ED II, p. 310). This short description indicates that, for Francis, praying was a holistic act, and it was crucial to his life. He ‘was a prayer’ with spirit and soul, with body and flesh.

This article presents a chronology of five steps in St. Francis of Assisi’s prayer-life based on five sources taken from his own writings. This journey does not implicate that St. Francis is the ultimate spiritual role model and every adherent of Franciscan prayer has to follow his path. On the contrary, the subsequent journey through the Franciscan practice of prayer first of all reveals that prayer has an individual and biographical connection. The act of prayer is integrated in all experiences and deeds of an individual human life. Beyond that, the author of this article is convinced that Francis of Assisi, as a spiritual leader, not only of his order but also of many people up to the present day, realized some intersubjective and time-transcending hallmarks about the dialogue between God and human nature, which aids one in the understanding of the act of prayer and, finally, helps one to pray (Blastic 2007; Delio 2004).

2. Self-Discovery and Self-Surrender: The Prayer before the Cross (1205–1206)

The year 1205–1206 was the year of the “conversion” of St. Francis. In less theological words: it was a time of seeking and struggling, a time of uncertainty and doubts, and a time of farewell to his old life as a merchant, not yet knowing what exactly would be his future way of life. During this

period of his life, in his mid-20s, Francis was straying around in the forest outside of Assisi. Within this year, the life-changing encounter with the leper happened, but for Francis it was also a period of the existential practice of prayer. Fortunately, a text from this time has been preserved, written in an Umbrian idiom, which came to Francis' mind and heart curing this period of his life. It is commonly known as "Prayer before the cross":

"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." (FA:ED I, p. 40)

This first writing of St. Francis is unique in different ways. In its serious and solemn mode of expression, this prayer is the only of his prayer to use the first person singular; it is the only prayer of Francis written before he had received brothers and so, in a way, it is a solitary prayer. Moreover, it is a petitionary prayer, which is very rare and not typical of Francis' writings, as we will see. These three indicators correlate. In the stage of "conversion", Francis is on his own without having a concept for his spiritual path. In "Prayer before the Cross", he uses a distinct religious language, e.g., the classical triad of faith, hope, and charity (1 Cor 13:13). However, he manages to adapt this old language to his personal situation. There is a gap between the "most high" and "glorious" God and the darkness of Francis' heart. Despite this gap, Francis performs an act that constitutes "prayer": acclamation to God. Two acclamations—one extensive ("most high, glorious God") and one short, like a sigh ("Lord")—start the dialogue with God. The position of Francis is darkness and depth, but he calls on the "most high" and "glorious". What we can see in the linguistic analysis of this simple prayer is that Francis uses the language of the church and its liturgy, a language that he was taught and had heard many times in his life. In this period of conversion, he makes recourse to that language and appropriates it, aligns it with his mind and feelings, and combines it with his own words. Francis verbalizes a prayer, which becomes his own, an authentic expression of his heart. From a linguistic point of view, he turns from a "passive" prayer to an "active" prayer.

The two acclamations to God correspond with two petitions. First, Francis asks for enlightenment and for true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity. These attributes reveal Francis' background: in a situation of uncertainty and transition he seeks for clarification and confirmation. This is a basic type of prayer; praying means acclamation to God, or a turn towards God in any situation in order to capture the thread of conversation. Prayer expresses the search for personal stability from the stable and faithful God; prayer requests light from the enlightening God. Furthermore, in prayer grows the perception of who is God, as well as who I am, what the World is all about, and what my personal history is all about. In a generalized way, it is through prayer to the one and persistent God that the praying person can discover the self and find "identity" (Walser 2015, pp. 173–210). In this unsteady period of his life, it is surprising that the second petition of St. Francis already goes beyond himself and focuses on action: he asks for the gifts of sense and knowledge in order to carry out God's plans. Self-discovery and self-surrender are already combined. Francis is a young man, who is completely disoriented, but who is sincerely turning towards God and is wholeheartedly ready to do the next step and to "carry out" the consequences of this secret act of prayer.

Prayer is acclamation to God. At the beginning of every act of prayer there is the call of God's name—in this case, the "most high". However, in a larger context, this is not really the beginning of

prayer. The explicit act of prayer is more of a response to a call. The responsorial character of prayer is not seen in this explicit prayer, but it is present in the biography of Francis—in his experience of inner-darkness, weariness with his life, and, of course, in his response to God inspired by his experience with the leper and the poor in general. Prayer has a dialogical structure between the “Logos” of God—speaking to people in ‘World Experience’, through creation, history, and self-discovery—and the human answer to the most high and glorious God.

3. Prayer and Poverty: The Logic of Exchange (Earlier Rule, 1221)

The dialogical structure of prayer has a certain expression in St. Francis writings: the Latin word “*reddare*”, which means “to give back” or “to pay back”. For Francis, as a former businessman, the metaphor of money and economy is natural, and it is an essential part of his spirituality. The vow of poverty, exemplified in the “Sacred Exchange with Lady Poverty” (FA:ED I, pp. 529–54), has a certain impact not only concerning fraternal life and care for the poor but also concerning his prayer. Being impecunious means receiving all things from God. At the end of a day, in the evening prayers, a Franciscan prayer gives back everything to God through the recitation of a thanksgiving prayer. In the Earlier Rule, Francis invites his brothers:

“Let us refer (*reddamus*) all good to the Lord, God Almighty and Most High,
 acknowledge that every good is His,
 and thank Him (*gratias referamus*), from Whom all good comes, for everything.
 May He, the Almighty and Most High, the only true God,
 have (*habet*), be given (*reddantur*), and receive (*recipiat*)
 all honor and respect
 all praise and blessing
 all thanks and glory
 to Whom all good belongs,
 He Who alone is good.”
 (ER XVII, 17-18; FA:ED I, p. 76; Esser [1876] 1989, p. 392f.)

The semantic field of “restituting”, “giving”, “receiving”, and “belonging” is quite prominent in Chapter XVII of the Earlier Rule of St. Francis. “Good, all Good, the highest Good” is one of Francis’ favorite names for God. Everything comes from him, results from him, is his donation—and therefore has to be given back to him. In one of his “Admonitions”, Francis carries the metaphor of restitution to the extreme when he says: “Blessed the servant who returns (*reddit*) every good to the Lord God because whoever holds onto something for himself hides the money of his Lord God within himself” (Adm 18,2; FA:ED I, p. 134).

Looking at this logic of exchange and restitution, one comes to understand why praise and thanksgiving are frequently found in Francis’ writings, much more so than supplication and petitionary prayer (Delio 2004, pp. 77–88; Blastic 2007, p. 11). As people receive their lives, and hence the condition of the possibility to pray, from God, they have reason to give him thanks. To put it systematically, praying is a responsorial form of owing oneself. Prayer is first of all “doxology” in the etymological sense of the word: to find a word (“logos”) appropriate to answer to the Glory of God (“doxa”) (Walser 2015, p. 245–51). Within the dialogical-responsorial concept of prayer, there is also space for lamentation—like in Francis’ “Office of the Passion”—but in his writings one can find a stunning majority of praise and thanksgiving (Ruffo 2010).

The idea of doxology as an exchange and restitution leads directly to Francis’ understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist. Besides the literally meaning (“thanksgiving”) of the Greek word, Francis gives a glowing answer for the donation of the Eucharist and writes in the “Letter to the Entire

Order” in the same logic of exchange: “Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally” (LtOrd 29; FA:ED I, p. 118).

According to Francis, “restitution” to God includes not only the one direction towards God in the form of thanksgiving prayer, but it also has a double effect on life and action. Thus, living in poverty firstly means to be receptive, living with an attitude of empty hands, and secondly to hand out gifts to poor and needy people, not as an act of charity, but as form of “restitution” of what should rightfully belong to them (Zweerman and Goorbergh 2009, pp. 114–26). Saint Bonaventure, one of Francis’ hagiographers, reports a situation that is quite interesting in this context, when Francis, coming back from Siena, met a poor man and felt that he has to give away his own cloak. Francis says: “We must give back (*reddamus*) to this poor man his mantle, for it is his! For we accepted it on loan until we should happen upon someone poorer than we are.” Moreover, Francis relates this act of charity directly to God, continuing: “The great Almsgiver (*Magnus Eleemosynarius*) will accuse me of theft if I do not give what I have to someone in greater need” (FA:ED II, p. 589). God is the “Great Almoner”, from whom all goods derive and are distributed. Restitution to God occurs in prayer as well as in giving alms. Moreover, restitution to God occurs through the medium of passing on gifts to others. Again, one can discern a very subtle but reasonable integration of prayer and action, of worship and charity.

4. Pure Affirmation: “The Praise of God” (1224)

Francis uses mostly prayers of praise and thanksgiving. Nevertheless, the situation described in “Prayer before the Cross”, the situation of darkness, came back to his heart many times during his life. Although Francis was given an unforeseeable number of companions and perhaps because of his companions, Francis suffered from feelings of isolation and darkness. His last personal prayer, “The Praise of God”, is dated September 1224, around the liturgical feast of the ‘Exaltation of the Cross’. This is his only autographic prayer. It was transmitted as a personal gift to Brother Leo, his companion on Mount La Verna, where Francis wrote the following words on a small parchment:

“You are holy Lord God who does wonderful things.
 You are strong. You are great. You are the most high.
 You are the almighty king. You holy Father, King of heaven and earth.
 You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;
 You are the good, all good, the highest good, Lord God, living and true.
 You are love, charity, You are wisdom, You are humility,
 You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness,
 You are security, You are rest,
 You are gladness and joy, You are our hope, You are justice,
 You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.
 You are beauty, You are meekness,
 You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,
 You are strength, You are refreshment.
 You are our hope, You are our faith, You are our charity,
 You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life:
 Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful savior.”
 (FA:ED I, p. 109)

The Franciscan scholars provide a vast exegesis and interpretation of this prayer, analyzing the names of God and their arrangement (Lehmann 1984, pp. 249–67; Lehmann 2007, pp. 174–93), counting the number of acclamations, which total 33. Kathleen Warren, Jean Jeusset, and others

advocate the remarkable thesis that Francis was influenced by the 99 beautiful Names of God in Islam (Warren 2003, pp. 88–90, 122–38). For the specific approach to see Francis as someone who teaches how to pray and what it means to pray, one should first consider the circumstances of this prayer. Francis spent days and weeks in prayer and contemplation during the Lent of St. Michael, while Leo supported him with water and bread. The meditation of the passion and the cross in San Damiano at the beginning of his journey came to an end at this point. Again, Francis felt doubtful and afraid not only regarding his own future, but also of the future of the fast-growing order. Was he on the right path to carry out God's "holy and true command"? We will never have an authentic idea of the inner experience of Francis, which caused the exterior signs of stigmatization. However, after this experience of affirmation and closeness to God, he wrote a poetic text of pure affirmation. "The Praise of God" is a deeply affective prayer, although it contains a number of theological and speculative attributes of God. It is a very personal prayer, although Francis never uses the first person. It is an expression of God's ineffability, precisely because he felt that he needed not one or two but 99 names to express God's nature. So, the prayer is, in the least, an eloquent example of an apophatic theology.

The logical structure of the prayer is not dialectical, not "Yes" nor "No", but affirmative. There are no words like "no", "not", "bad", or "evil". It is rather a litany of saying "You". It is pure affirmation. It is again the affirmation of the triad of Francis' first prayer: "God is good" (3×), he is "our faith", "God is love and charity" (3×), "God is hope" (2×). In general, prayer is affirmation to God in response to being affirmed by Him. On Mount La Verna, Francis comes retrospectively to the positive affirmation of his entire journey and his whole life. It is a prayer of thanksgiving—no longer thanksgiving for individual gifts and blessings, but thanks and praise to God "for God's sake". In the Earlier Rule, Francis summarizes this concept and puts it straight: "We thank You for Yourself (*propter teipsum*)" (ER 23:1; FA:ED I, p. 81).

5. Universal Liturgy: "Canticle of the Creatures" (1225)

The dialectic between the ineffability of God and his many names is dissolved in the world-famous "Canticle of the Creatures". While on one hand it is obvious that "no human is worthy to mention your name" (V.2), on the other hand all creatures are invited to praise God ("*Laudato si*", meaning "Praised be You, my Lord"). It is a genuine thought of Francis that other creatures are possibly even better at praising their Creator than human beings: "And all creatures under heaven serve, know, and obey their Creator, each according to its own nature, better than you" (Ad 5:2; FA:ED I, p. 131). In the "Canticle of the Creatures", all beings are united in the praise of their creator. The full text of this artful poem, originally written in an Umbrian dialect of Italian, follows below:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing,
To you alone Most High do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon, and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,

through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
 through whom You light the night,
 and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
 Praise be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
 who sustains and governs us,
 and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
 and bear infirmity and tribulation.
 Blessed are those who endure in peace
 for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily death,
 from whom no one living can escape.
 Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
 Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
 for the second death shall do them no harm.
 Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
 and serve Him with great humility.
 (FA:ED I, p. 113f)

The biographical conditions of the genesis of the “Canticle” are noteworthy. It is not an outflow of happiness and affinity towards creation; on the contrary, the canticle emerged from the experience of darkness, illness, and especially the incompatibility of “brother sun and brother fire”, as we know from a legend called “Assisi Compilation”: “Blessed Francis lay there for more than fifty days, and was unable to bear the light of the sun during the day or the light of a fire at night. He stayed in the dark in the house, inside the little cell. In addition, day and night he had great pains in his eyes so that at night he could scarcely rest or sleep. This was very harmful and was a serious aggravation for his eye disease and his other illnesses” (FA:ED II, p. 185). The song is mainly about overcoming the experience of darkness and night (Lehmann 1984, pp. 279–324).

The “Canticle” obviously is influenced by Old Testament psalms and canticles, such as Psalm 140 and the canticle of the “The Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace” in the book of Daniel (Dan 3:52–90). There, all creatures—angels, men, animals, elements, plants—are required to praise the Lord: “Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars . . . ” (Ps 148:3). The language of Francis’ canticle is much more nuanced: “*Laudato si per suora luna*” or “*per frate vento*” can signify that God is praised by the creature, through the creature, or even for the creature. (1) The creatures themselves praise God—as also seen in the examples of the Old Testament and as St. Francis calls the natural elements to do so. (2) The creatures are also the medium of the glorification of God, since the beauty of the world may not only lead to the recognition of God (Rom 1:20), but further may remind and encourage humans to praise and worship him. This is the semantic tendency of the English translation at hand. (3) The creatures are finally the reason for the grateful praise to God. Praised be God for all beautiful things, including “our Sister Bodily death”. In the author’s point of view, the Latin/Italian preposition “*per*” should be read considering its polysemy, as is typical in a

mystical text. Francis wants to praise God with (V.3) the creatures, but also through them and for them—and, of course, by them (Lehmann 1984, pp. 304–9).

It has to be registered that the “Canticle of the Creatures” neither hangs on a dualism between heaven and earth, as it was proclaimed by the Cathars in that time, nor supports a pure nature-mysticism, as some contemporary interpretations contend. A universal view of brotherhood and sisterhood comes from a Christocentric mysticism. The incarnation of Christ in this world with all the elements is the basis of the recognition of all created things as brothers and sisters, because there is one God above all, who is called “our Father”. It has to be noted that, unlike in Francis’ “Praise of God” (1224), but also unlike the Old Testament examples, Francis uses singular and plural possessive pronouns (my, your, our . . .). These are grammatical signs of relationship. They refer to the relationship between the elements and to what is common for everybody and everything—such as “our Sister Mother Earth” (9) and “our Sister Bodily death” (12). So, the use of possessive pronouns establishes the typical intersubjective perspective of this prayer.

In the progress of the prayer-life of Francis, one can see this ultimate prayer as a further step of contemplation from the pure affirmation of God to a universal affirmation of all created things and a universal closeness with all things. Lehmann summarizes that the “Canticle of the Creation” is “a result and an experience of universal communication. In a living connection with God, Francis opens the door to ever-new approaches to nature, which reveal themselves to him as the calligraphy of God. He reads of the inexhaustible creativeness of the all-powerful, good Lord. Everything becomes transparent to God. That is why he can connect with everything, including death. Nothing is excluded from the communication (Lehmann 1984, p. 324). Franciscan contemplation means not to withdraw from the world in a closed cell of a hermitage, but to be connected to all things and to overcome all earthly boundaries in order to overcome the boundary between creation and God. In Franciscan spirituality, there is a mutual link between God and earthly things without the need for a pantheist worldview. Therefore, one who has experienced God, like St. Francis, can find him and recognize his bounty in all things; one who contemplates natural things up to their end is on a path to God.

There are many more things that may deepen the interpretation of this elaborate prayer (Delio 1992; Lehmann 1984, pp. 279–324; Allen and Allen 1996). However, at this point, only the ending of the canticle should be emphasized, as it is overlooked in most interpretations but corresponds with our former observations. After the invitation to the act of praise, which is repeated at the beginning of each of the eight stanzas, Francis closes with the words: “Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility” (V.14). After an extensive prayer of praise, Francis once more reverts to the mode of thanksgiving. Referring to previous explanations about the attitude of thanksgiving as “giving back”, the author conceives all the created things as God’s gifts, which are undeserved and must be given back to him in an act of praise. After the last stanzas of “sister Bodily death” and in the year before his actual death, this act of restitution became a very specific example of giving back his life to God. Surprisingly the prayer ends with the second direction of restitution—not in the act of praise and thanksgiving, but in the act of discipleship: “serve him with great humility”. The closing formula of Francis prayers—even here—is not the Trinitarian doxology but the manifestation of the will to live one’s life in the humble service of God and of one’s brothers and sisters, as was sung so solemnly in this canticle. With the phrase “serve him with great humility” in his last prayer, Francis refers back to his first prayer under the cross of San Damiano, where he asked to “carry out Your holy and true command.” This illustrates that Franciscan prayer and contemplation keep the world in view and lead to action.

6. Prayer and Action: “Do Not to Extinguish the Spirit of Prayer” (Later Rule, 5)

Looking back to the actual life of St. Francis, one can clearly see that he lived a “*vita mixta*”, where periods of lent and prayer in a hermitage alternated with times of travel and preaching from town to town. Contemplation and action both belong to a Franciscan life. However, the task is not to distinguish one from the other, but to bring contemplation and action together. The experience

of St. Francis was that this is not possible without certain times completely reserved for prayer in the daily, weekly, or annual cycle. That is why he implements the continuous Liturgy of the Hours in the prayer practice of the order. In the Later Rule (1223), chapter 5, Francis tries to incorporate his personal experience into the structure of the order, when he writes: "... do not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all temporal things must contribute" (FA:ED I, p. 102). This advice is relevant in all types of work the brothers were engaged in. Francis repeats exactly the same words in his letter to Brother Anthony of Padua (+1231), where he refers to the first academic activities in the order: "I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers providing that, as is contained in the Rule, you do not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion during study of this kind" (FA:ED I, p. 107). Whatever work Franciscans are dedicated to and whatever challenges they are facing, Francis is worried about the possibility that the trouble of daily life may suppress and overrun the act of prayer and a certain "contemplative" attitude. This concern seems to be understandable in contemporary times as well.

From the very beginning of the church, there was always an attempt to prevent prayer from becoming a separate part of active life. The famous invitation of St. Paul, "Pray without ceasing!" (1 Th 5,17), was always interpreted in this regard. St. Bonaventure (+1274), the great theological magister of the Franciscan order, distinguishes three different ways of "unceasing prayer". In his interpretation of Luke 11:9 ("... ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"), Bonaventure concludes that prayer is either explicit vocal prayer ("ask"), or it expresses the inner desire for good ("seek"), or it is the work of good deeds and just actions ("knock") (Johnson 2000, pp. 97–131). Francis himself was an example of all modes of prayer; he was, as his other biographer said, "not so much praying as becoming totally prayer" (2 Cel 95; FA:ED II, p. 310). Franciscan prayer therefore is applicable to life, experience, and encounters with the other. Prayer is not an isolated act in private peace and quiet. Prayer has a natural output into life. And, conversely, whatever one experiences, whom one meets, and what one does can and shall enter into the explicit act of prayer.

7. Conclusions

Francis of Assisi found his own and individual way of praying. As such, Franciscan spirituality is not about copying the path of the founder saint, but it is about finding out one's own way. Therefore, the first characteristic is that Franciscan prayer is individual. Like St. Francis before the Cross, prayer is an existential-biographical talk in front of God and an explicit acclamation to God. In this sense, there is no substitution, no delegation. "The Journey of the Mind to God" begins as a "sight of the poor Man in the desert" (Bonaventure). The more a person prays individually, personally, and faithfully, the deeper and more fertile the prayer will probably be. Francis' experience of praying with this individual attitude shows that one actually does not find oneself in a monologic talk, but that prayer has a dialogical character. One gets to know that the act of prayer is a "re-action", rather an answer to a silent call. Prayer is active and responsorial; prayer is dialogical and follows the logic of exchange. That is the structure one can find very often in Francis' prayers. Bringing one's life to God, one gives back what one received from God. Therefore, Franciscan prayer always contains a word of thanksgiving and is—thirdly—affirmative. One realizes that the condition of the possibility of prayer and of life in general is owed to God. The affirmation of the gift of life and of God as the Creator of life leads to an attitude of affirmation of the world, as one can see in the "Canticle of the Creatures". Affirmative prayer becomes universal. There is nothing that does not relate to God, and so there is nothing that cannot be part of prayer. Everything—even death—can guide one a prayer toward God, the Creator of all things. Of course, this universal and holistic concept of prayer is a lofty purpose and bears the risk of remaining a mere spiritual but unworldly idea. Hence, the last characteristic of Franciscan prayer is very important: prayer is connected to actions and work. A concept of prayer that is isolated in certain words and focused on certain times is not compatible with a worldly Franciscan spirituality. Surprisingly, Francis prays, even in the most seclusive moments of his life, that his prayers might have

some “output” and that he may fulfil “God’s commands”. Prayer is in fact a sort of action, and human actions can show the characteristics of prayer (individual, responsorial, affirmative, universal). There is a deep connection between prayer and discipleship. Referring to an early Christian dogmatic maxim, one could say, *lex credendi est lex vivendi*—the way we live is the way we pray. This points to the real spiritual purpose: prayer is covered by life—and life enters in acts of prayer. Each person and each era must find out what that specifically means. A quite specific and impressive example, indeed, can be found in the life and in the prayers of St. Francis of Assisi.

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