**A DIFFERENT WORLDVIEW**

**Richard Rohr OFM**

Before we begin to outline Franciscan alternative orthodoxy, it is helpful to look at the Franciscan worldview, which grew out of the historical and cultural context in which St Francis lived. Today’s meditation will be a little longer to give a full background.

Francis was born in Assisi, Italy, in the year 1181. He died in 1226. It was a time of great social and economic change and much violence between Italian city-states. Before and during his life, Europe and the Muslim world were involved in four Crusades, and there were more to come. Christians were fighting Muslims; Muslims had overtaken what Christians considered their holy places in Jerusalem; and the Christians of the West were fighting the Eastern Orthodox Christians. Added to that, Assisi itself was in an ongoing war with Perugia, a little city to the west. In the year 1202, Francis was taken prisoner in a battle against Perugia. In 1204, he escaped from prison. He emerged dazed, disillusioned, and deeply hoping for something more, something different than all the terrible violence that had destroyed his youth. His world was obsessed with war, with security, with self-protection, and with fear of the outsider. (Does this sound familiar?) Everyone in Assisi was armed; revenge, scapegoating, cruelty, torture, and aggression against enemies were rampant and even socially sanctioned and idealized, much as they are today.

Francis seemed to realize that there was an intrinsic connection between violence and possessions, power, and prestige. So, he rejected all of them. His father was among the first generation of the new propertied business class. Francis recognized that his father’s obsession with money and property had destroyed his father’s soul, and so he set out on a very different path. Francis concluded that the only way out of such a world was to live a life of voluntary poverty or “non-possession.” He refused to be part of the moneyed class because he knew that once you owned something you’d have to protect it, and for some reason, you would inevitably try to get more of it. Francis said, “Look, Brothers, if we have any possessions, we will need arms to protect them…. Therefore, we do not want to possess anything in this world.”

Francis felt that in order to find a way out, he had to live in close proximity and even solidarity with the excluded ones in his society. He literally changed sides. He had been born among the upper class in Upper Assisi. In the lower part of town lived the lower class. Francis not only moved to the other side of town, but he actually moved to the plain below Assisi where there was a leper colony. The word “leper” did not always refer to the contagious disease. Rather, the lepers in both Jesus’ and Francis’ times represented the excluded ones, the ones whom society had decided were unacceptable, unworthy, or unclean for a number of reasons. Francis told us to identify not with the upper class and the climb toward success, power, and money, but to go to where Jesus went—to where there was pain, to the excluded ones. We were to find our place not in climbing but in descending, not at the top but at the bottom, not among the insiders but with the outsider. What an upside-down world!

Francis, seeing the beginnings of the propertied leisure class, told us to work for our pay; and if work was not available, we were to humbly beg, just as the Buddha advised his monks. Francis recognized that his society was becoming a structured system of protected and unequal social relationships. He knew the violence, mistrust, ambition, and pride which that worldview would engender. So, he insisted on what he called equal power relationships in religious communities. He rejected all titles like Superior or Abbot. Francis did not want anyone to act as if he was higher than anyone else. Even those who led the community were to be called friars or brothers, and they only held the office for a short term and then returned to the equality of brotherhood. No one should stay at the top for very long; and when they were there, they were to be servant leaders or “guardians” of the mission and message of the friars.

In Francis we see the emergence of a very different worldview, a worldview that is not based on climbing, achieving, possessing, performing, or any idealization of order, but a life that enjoys and finds deep satisfaction on the level of naked being itself—much more than doing or having. He learned this from Jesus. It seems to me the Franciscan worldview is now desperately important if the 7.4 billion of us are going to exist happily together on this one limited planet. Voluntary simplicity is now essential for social survival. Francis warned us where we were headed eight hundred years ago.

**Gateway to Silence:**Love with your whole heart, soul, mind, and body.

**Reference:**Adapted from Richard Rohr, The Art of Letting Go: Living the Wisdom of Saint Francis (Sounds True: 2010), disc 1 ([CD](http://store.cac.org/The-Art-of-Letting-Go-CD_p_122.html)).

Copyright © 2018 by CAC. Used by permission of CAC. All rights reserved worldwide.

Sign up for *Daily Meditations* by going to <https://cac.org/richard-rohr/daily-meditations-archive/>