

# In Prism

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*for XB*

**I**n Umbria, pastel air clings to the mountains in veils of pink and mauve. Everything near the surface seems unusually soft, even the stones. Francis was born and died in Assisi, central Italy, around the turn of the twelfth century.

I have read that he was humiliated by his merchant father and ran off to join the military but got whooping cough and had to turn back. On the way he tried to save face by joining a subversive operation and ended up in prison for a whole year.

There, he stopped singing, speaking, or smiling.

For millennia people have wanted a God and a sky where knowledge and history are stored, so that when someone punched you or kicked you down the stairs and there was no one else but the evil one beside you, you could look up from the ground and say, "God knows what you have done."

It seems important that every act is known, even if it goes unpunished, I don't know why, or why the sky is the repository vault. The Pseudo Dionysus said that "the more distant the soul is from the body, the more available it is to the influx of spiritual substances."

The final encounter with his father describes Francis taking off all his clothes and standing naked in front of the angry man. Then he lay on the ground on his back as if he were laying his life down, the way lovers do, or having his body prepared for funeral rites. He pushed his heap of clothes towards his father, and then continued looking up.

I can hear nothing but birds from outside the open window and the bray of a donkey like the sound at the opening of Bresson's *Balthazar*.

In the seventies Cardinal Ratzinger silenced the Franciscan liberationist theologians. He called them secular heretics and ideologues who would damage the Church by teaching people to solve their own social problems. But the populace got angry, and he had to relent, and allow them to speak again of a religious humanism.

Just around the time of St. Francis, the Pope (Innocent) was obsessed with heretics and had the Cathars massacred in the Albigensian Crusade in France. This was a massacre like that at Masada, which was horrifying to even the most avowedly Catholic in the population. Women, children... but most memorably, the Cathars did not resist but stood their ground and held to their progressive beliefs.

Martyrs are not saints but they are certain. The Cathars held tight to many beliefs that Francis himself did, Francis who was called the Little Frenchman because of his love of French poetry, the moon, sun and bits of nature whom he addressed in the second person. Like him, the Cathars did

not believe that love and power could coexist.

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The first question in the Catechism is:  
What was humanity born for?  
*To be happy* is the correct answer.

Once Francis was on the road with his friends, he was happy. Up till then, the people in town threw rocks at him. They abused him as the children abused the priest in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. They believed he was damaged already. They slapped mud on his face and hunched over, cackling at his surprise. They kicked him from behind, pushed him, and drew blood. This was when he began walking alone in his strange outfit, staring out in wonder.

One day he cast off the threads he was wearing and stood naked on the edge of the forest. The crowd saw the lacerations they had left on his body, and withdrew, embarrassed. This is the Glory part of the Mass I never composed, because when Francis looks at them with his lifted face, his cheeks are coloured by an explosion of clouds. Years later he would have his eyes cauterized by fire.

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The curate, passing, asks children in a patronizing and suspicious voice:

What is God?

What do the Scriptures teach?

How did God create the world?

The curate moves forward with his lips pursed. In some way he resembles Joseph in Pasolini's film about Jesus.

Joseph is suspicious of Mary. His lips tighten when he looks at her, but then the angel comes and his lips soften.

Pavel Florensky in prison realized that gold was not a colour. John in prison had his visions that emerged like the faces you see behind your sealed eyelids.

Francis wondered before the Pontiff:  
Why do we want to learn how to live wisely?  
We are just going to die.

For what purpose should we resist hitting people with our fists and spit?  
And, without waiting for an answer, he did four somersaults.

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A penny per footfall, is the rule of the world.

## POETRY REVIEW 'The Furthest Reach'

We all sat in the car leaving Assisi wondering about living in America. We had all put in time over the years, trying to move the country into a more humane and just democracy. Now not one of us could see much improvement in education or health care, in housing or care for the planet. The same division existed between those who feared the government and those who trusted government as when we were young.

Rush hour between Assisi and Umbertide was mild and fast-moving on the two lane highway. Hills and vineyards looping up and over themselves. How orderly the old cypresses are, and how well this country seemed to understand the relationship between the earth and the sky, was the other topic of conversation.

In the tomb of St. Francis I saw a woman writhing and sobbing "Mamma Mia" on a bench, while the tourists filed past and the monks ignored her. She was pregnant. Was she in labour? Or overstimulated by the presence of Francis entombed?

It was an atmosphere of cold dense ions and ash. In the little door to the upper chapel a monk sat on the floor singing the rosary. This chapel was set inside a giant imperial church, a little golden seed at the heart of stone.

I remembered Anna Magnani in *Mama Roma*, being so rough, so loud, so pushy, a force of nature. Like a stallion, her movements graceful and wild, her face receives every emotion without any intervention of a second thought.

The bored boys, brutal men, the motorbikes and helmets circle the statue of the Madonna, for they will die speeding.

"I love my mother," said the boy in the movie climbing up the post-War rubble with the girl.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because I would cry if she died."

Mamma Roma loved him and did everything to make him happy and to protect him, and look what happened.

Francis was rarely well. He carried several physical problems with him, his eyesight was increasingly weak. But he went ahead and lived with lepers for a time, and made sure his friars had enough to eat, usually a pot of unsalted vegetable soup that acquired a wonderful consistency when cooked with lumps of bread in it.

They slept under the stars or inside a cowshed near their church.

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I will always associate Rome with a walnut.

That night I drank walnut liqueur, just a sip, it tasted like kahlua. The inner wing of a bird is the colour of a doe.

And the turned-over earth is the colour of a nut, and a bird, but soon it will be watered for the green wheat of spring.

Flying up the hill on the back of the motorbike in the warm Roman air was like drinking from the fountain of youth.

Umbrella trees along the Tiber.

I walked on the rooftops across Rome, including a grassy one, and one where a palm grew out of a crack in the rocks.

I was carrying an assortment of envelopes containing paintings and notes for my Mass but they could not be managed easily because their shapes were irregular.

Some had juttings, some were swollen, the colour red was prominent. They depicted divided cities, divided into layers, not all in a line. A layer cake sagging under the weight of accumulated dust, dirt and now grass.

Each layer had been purchased at the cost of decades, even centuries of hand-hurting, back-breaking slave labor. *Caveat emptor!*

Broken columns, mashed marble friezes and faces. The triumph of greed was written across my storyboard. The city was a mighty and devouring creation, a creature with a crusted skin.

The air, the sun, the moon and a spark were the only places of serenity and enlightenment.

Even in the city you look for a place that welcomes you. You actually want to be found!

Being found is the polar opposite of making a vow.

No people are involved.

When you sit down on a stone, face up to the sun, you can't help but think *Mine, mine*. And you don't have to promise anything to anyone in time.

You may be called to a place of banality or genius, but as long as it is your own happiness that responds to it, you are available to something divine.

Mozart sat at the piano for the better part of every day.

All over the world monks have lived in desert hovels as scribes, prophets, mendicants. They are the extreme realization of one aspect of human personality that tends towards lack of possession and solitude.

People recognize them as authentic players, whether they are Zen or Christian.

On the other hand, "I don't believe a word of it," is what most people think when somebody who has power starts talking.

There was a hole in the roof of the Pantheon where we were told that the snow fell through onto the relics of Catherine of Siena the mystic and onto the porphyry.

St. Francis wept and stripped, laughed and lectured and called creation "you" all the way to the end. When he was dying he asked to be stripped naked to lie on the floor in the cow-shed. Then he covered the wound on his right side with his left hand, so no one could see it.

He had had enough. Leprosy and he was starving, eyesore, but still looking up, while the friars were squabbling.

## POETRY REVIEW 'The Furthest Reach'

A man in Rome told me that a monkey climbed down a wall holding an infant in his arms and in remembrance there is a statue of the Madonna on the very rooftop where he began his descent.

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In 1950 Roberto Rossellini made a movie based on the life of Francis called *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*.

It included flowers pulled from bushes, flowers as white and immaculate as Swann's own hawthorne.

Rossellini's ethic in film-making was Franciscan: to use little money, shoot spontaneously and edit not much.

Like the "first word, best word" school of poetry, Rossellini mistrusted the process of refinement and treated his films as some might treat their notebooks, or first drafts.

This method worked for a number of reasons. He was already a director comfortable with his work, and he knew what the limits of his subject were. Complexity of character was not an issue. Rossellini, a man who loved women, was a communist for a time and a Catholic as a child. He was obsessed by the Second World War and Italy's behavior under Mussolini. He hoped St. Francis, as a radical and fully enlightened subject, might redeem the shameful failure of his country to mobilize against Hitler.

