



Article

# Francis of Assisi, Christology, and mission

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## Abstract

In recent years, global theologians of mission have emphasized a posture of mission from below—missional engagement from a place of weakness and vulnerability. In part a reaction to the mistakes of Christendom and Christian mission's alliance with political and economic power, mission from below aims to recover first-century mission that emulates the way of Christ and the apostles. This approach to mission is also relevant in contexts today where Christian freedom (for worship and witness) is limited by tyrannical or resistant governments. As we strive to be as wise as serpents and gentle as doves in contemporary mission, it seems fruitful to explore the theology of mission of a medieval Italian mendicant monk who ministered to Muslims during the Crusades. In this article, following a brief narrative of Francis of Assisi's (1181–1226) life and journey in mission, I will focus on Francis's Christology and how that shaped his approach to mission among Muslims and others. Finally, I will conclude with some reflections for what the church on mission today might gain from Francis.

## Keywords

Francis of Assisi, Christology, mission, mission from below, Muslim ministry, Islam, history of mission

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mission that emulates the way of Christ and the apostles. This approach to mission is also relevant in contexts today where Christian freedom (for worship and witness) is limited by tyrannical or resistant governments. As we strive to be as wise as serpents and gentle as doves in contemporary mission, it seems fruitful to explore the theology of mission of a medieval Italian mendicant monk who ministered to Muslims during the Crusades. In this article, following a brief narrative of Francis of Assisi's (1181–1226) life and journey in mission, I will focus on Francis's Christology and how that shaped his approach to mission among Muslims and others. Finally, I will conclude with some reflections for what the church on mission today might gain from Francis.

## **Francis's life and journey in mission**

Francis was born in 1181 to a wealthy father—an Italian cloth merchant—and a French mother. As a young man, his primary aim was to become a knight and warrior, and he engaged in clan warfare in his home region of Perugia in central Italy. As his hometown of Assisi was embroiled in civil war in 1202, Francis was captured and put in prison. This served as a period of forced reflection that led to his conversion to Christ. By 1205, Francis renounced his family's wealth and aspirations for glory in battle, and became a monk.

Francis's call to monastic living and service unfolded between 1205 and 1208, and contained three distinct elements. First, a voice called him to repair the dilapidated church at San Damiano, a symbol for bringing spiritual renewal to the universal church. Next, Francis encountered a leper, embraced him, and committed his life to serving the poor. Third, he vowed to imitate Christ in complete simplicity and voluntary poverty (Moorman, 1968: 4–6; Peters, 2015: 179–180; Lawrence, 1994: 32; Robson, 2012a: 1–3; Robson, 2012c: 35–38). His commitment to ministry was confirmed in 1208 when he heard Christ's words from Matthew 10:7–10 (NIV) read in church:

As you go, proclaim this message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts—no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep.

By 1210, Francis attracted a small group of followers who joined him in service and preaching. They were unmatched among other medieval mendicant orders in their commitment to radical poverty. Though Francis advocated periods of withdrawal for prayer and meditation, the Friars Minor followed a coenobitic (communal) monastic vision, which facilitated one of their central activities—*itinerant preaching*. While obeying their monastic leaders, the Franciscans resisted a hierarchical structure that emphasized power. Instead, leaders washed the feet of others and maintained a posture of servanthood. Francis himself resigned as the leader of the Friars Minor in 1219 to serve the order as a missionary among Muslims. Though the Franciscans did not follow an existing monastic rule (e.g. Augustinian, Benedictine), they were given official

status through a papal bull in 1216. By 1221, the order had grown to include more than 3000 monks, including a community of sisters led by Clare of Assisi (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 1–2, 5, 7, 11; Francis, *Admonitions* 4–5; Lawrence, 1994: 31, 34, 37, 48–60, 108–112; Moorman, 1968: 10–12, 20–25, 32–39, 184–187; Robson, 2012a: 3; Robson, 2012c: 39–41; Cusato, 2012: 20–29; Godet-Calogeras, 2012: 115–126).<sup>1</sup>

The Franciscan way of life was largely articulated in two rules—the *Earlier Rule* (1221) and the *Rule* (1223). The *Earlier Rule* was longer and provided more detail on Francis’s monastic values and practice while the latter *Rule* was more concise and is still accepted by the Franciscans to this day (Short, 2012: 50–51, 54–59; Moorman, 1968: 14–15, 18–19; Armstrong and Brady, 1982: 107–108).

For Francis and his brothers, living out the gospel included a daily observance of prayer, meditation of Scripture, and liturgy while also fasting on a regular basis. The community was also occupied with manual labor as a strategy for staying focused in prayer and also as a means for earning a living. Francis and the brothers often worked in exchange for food, deliberately avoiding the temptation of money by refusing to handle coins. This attitude toward money captured the heart of the mendicant movement and served as a prophetic example toward the growing merchant economy in Europe, which Francis had already abandoned. The friars also survived by begging for alms. Finally, in addition to prayer, worship, and work, the Franciscans were largely occupied with itinerant, evangelistic preaching (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 3, 7.3–12, 8, 9.1–12, 14–15; Francis, *Rule* 3.1–9, 4–5, 6.1–6; Robson, 2012a: 5; Robson, 2012c: 40, 42; Cusato, 2012: 19; Moorman, 1968: 17).

Francis and the Friars Minor engaged in cross-cultural mission work from a very early point in their history. Particularly burdened to “preach the Christian faith and penance to the Saracens [Muslims],” Francis set sail for the Holy Land in 1212 but never made it because of a shipwreck (cited in Cusato, 2012: 24). Later, he attempted to go to Spain and meet with the Muslim leader from Morocco but he fell ill. In 1217, as the order expanded, brothers were sent to other Italian provinces, Switzerland, Germany, France, Spain (to work with Muslims), Morocco, and Tunisia. A certain Brother Giles was deployed to work with Muslims, journeying to Spain in 1209, Palestine in 1215, and Tunisia in 1219. Francis’s own dream of preaching the gospel to Muslims was realized in 1219 when he took advantage of the Fifth Crusade and travelled with the Christian armies to Egypt. There, he walked across enemy lines and met with the Egyptian Sultan Malik al-Kamil and proclaimed the Christian message to him. In the following year, Francis continued his ministry to Muslims in Syria while also reaching out to dispersed Muslims in cities such as Jerusalem, Antioch, and Acre (Daniel, 2012: 241–242; Lawrence, 1994: 37–38, 43–46; Moorman, 1968: 24–25, 30–31, 62–74, 166–169, 227–229; Cusato, 2012: 25–27; McMichael, 2012: 128).

## Francis’s Christology

Though Francis’s theology was strongly Trinitarian and ecclesiological in focus, the central aspect of his theology, which shaped his vision for the Christian life and approach to mission, was Christology. Throughout his spiritual journey, Francis was

enamored with being intimately united with Christ. This was most apparent in the report that, following an extended period of prayer, he received the stigmata—literal piercings in his hands resembling what the Lord received in his sufferings (Moorman, 1968: 256; Armstrong and Brady 1982: 4). This unity with Christ naturally led to a passion for Francis to imitate Christ. He began his *Earlier Rule* (1:1) with the admonition for the brothers to follow “the teachings and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ” (also Francis, *Earlier Rule* 22.2; Francis, *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* 13).

So who was Jesus for Francis? What elements of Christ’s character did the friar emphasize and emulate in mission? From a survey of his writings, there are three primary aspects of his Christology that stand out. First, Francis celebrated Christ the Good Shepherd who suffered and laid down his life for others. Instructing the brothers to emulate this attribute, he wrote,

Let us all, brothers, look to the Good Shepherd who suffered the passion of the cross to save His sheep. The sheep of the Lord followed Him in tribulation and persecution, in insult and hunger, in infirmity and temptation, and in everything else, and they have received everlasting life from the Lord because of these things. (Francis, *Admonitions* 6.1–2; also Francis, *Earlier Rule* 22.32)

Second, Francis exalted Christ for being a servant who washed the feet of his disciples. Citing Jesus’ famous teaching “I did not come to be served but to serve” (Mt. 10:28), Francis reminded spiritual leaders that “Those who are placed over others should glory in such an office only as much as they would were they assigned the task of washing the feet of the brothers” (Francis, *Admonitions* 4.2; also Francis *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* 42, 47). For Francis, serving like Christ implied a perfect obedience and a willingness to sacrifice. Similar to Christ as Good Shepherd, a servant embraced suffering (Francis, *Admonitions* 3.1–6; Francis, *The Salutation of the Virtues* 14–18).

A third important aspect of Francis’s Christology was that Jesus was poor. In his *Rule* (6:3), Francis praised the “Lord [who] made himself poor for us in this world.” Probably no other Scripture shaped Francis’s thoughts on Christ’s poverty more than Paul’s words in 2 Cor 8:9 (NIV): “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Declaring that “holy poverty destroys the riches and avarice and cares of this world” (Francis, *Salutation of the Virtues* 11; also Francis, *Testament* 21–22, 24; Boff, 1982: 68, 72–73), Francis admonished his community to “strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 9.1; also Francis, *The Last Will Written for Clare and Her Sisters* 1.1; Francis, *A Letter to Brother Leo* 3; Francis, *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful*, 5). For Francis, embracing voluntary poverty was a key means for achieving unity with Christ.

Practically speaking, Francis expected each brother to “sell all his possessions and strive to give them all to the poor” (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 2.4; also Francis, *Rule* 2.5; 6.1–6). Devoting more space to poverty than any other topic in his *Earlier Rule* or

*Rule*, Francis also taught them to dress modestly, to live off of alms, and to never touch money (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 2; 8; Francis, *Rule* 4).

Moorman concludes (1968: 256) that Francis's vision for Christian living and ministry was based on his understanding of Christ: "renunciation and poverty, humility and self-abasement, the complete conquest of self-love and self-interest." Let us now explore how Francis applied this Christology in three areas of his approach to mission: ministry to the poor, preaching in general, and in ministry to Muslims.

### *Caring for the poor*

Francis's calling to the ascetic life and ministry came in part through encountering a man with leprosy whom he loved and embraced. This prompted him to spend the rest of his life caring for the poor, weak, and sick. Because of the commitment to voluntary poverty and simplicity, the mendicant monastic lifestyle naturally identified with the poor.

When embarking on missionary journeys, Francis and the brothers obeyed the Lord's command to take nothing with them. That is, they embraced poverty as they went out to evangelize and minister to nonbelievers (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 14.1; see also Lk. 9:3; 10:4; Mt. 10:10). In his *Earlier Rule* (9.2), Francis added that monks ought to live joyfully among the poor as part of their mission: "And they must rejoice when they live among people [who are considered to be] of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside." According to Thomas of Celano (*First Life* 76), Francis was motivated to serve the poor because he saw the image of Christ in them. When he served the poor, he served Christ. Lawrence (1994: 36) argues that ministering to the poor through preaching and practical care, including praying for healing for the sick, was the most important element of the Friar Minors' work. These ministry values clearly reflected Francis's view of Christ the poor man (also Francis, *Earlier Rule* 17; Peters, 2015: 179–180; Moorman, 1968: 125–128; Cusato, 2012: 22; McMichael, 2012: 130).

### *Preaching peace*

Francis's *Earlier Rule* indicates that preaching was vital to the work of the Friars Minor. Pope Gregory IX observed that Francis brought renewal to the church through "preaching in simple words, just as Samson destroyed the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass" (cited in Blastic, 2012: 69). Moorman (1968: 275) adds, "it was in the simple sermons to village congregations that the friars really excelled. Such sermons, being extemporaneous and delivered in the vernacular, were far more ephemeral than the Latin sermons of the great doctors." Delivered in a conversational manner that engaged the imagination and emotions of the audience, the friars' sermons were filled with references to Scripture and exemplary Bible characters that offered application to daily life (Lawrence, 1994: 126).

Francis's christological conviction that Christ was a servant was also apparent in his peaceful approach to proclamation. Following Jesus' model in Luke 10, the brothers were sent out two by two, with no possessions, and barefooted, symbolizing a posture of humility and peace. Francis expanded upon this posture when describing the manner of the brothers' preaching: "when they go about the world, they do not quarrel or fight with words (cf. Tim 2:14) or judge others; rather, let them be meek, peaceful, and unassuming, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming" (Francis, *Rule* 3.10–11; also Francis, *Earlier Rule* 11.1; 17.5). Celebrating peace even amid hardship in ministry, he added, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God (Mt 5:9). The true peacemakers are those who preserve peace of mind and body for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, despite what they suffer in this world" (Francis, *Admonitions* 15.1–2).

### *A peaceful martyr among Muslims*

In his *Earlier Rule*, Francis specifically raised the issue of ministry to Muslims, praising those who had this calling and offering insights for how to engage Muslims. He wrote,

Therefore, any brother, who by divine inspiration, desires to go among the Saracens and other non-believers should go with the permission of his minister and servant. And the minister should give [these brothers] permission and not oppose them, if he shall see that they are fit to be sent . . . As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among [the Saracens and nonbelievers] in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to *every creature for God's sake* (1 Pet 2:13) and to acknowledge that they are Christians. Another way is to proclaim the word of God when they see that it pleases the Lord, so that they believe in the all-powerful God—Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit—the Creator of all, the Son who is the Redeemer and Savior, and that they be baptized and become Christians. (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 16.3–7; also Francis, *Rule* 2.1–2)

Also, in his visit to the Egyptian Sultan Malik al-Kamil in 1219, Francis demonstrated some principles for ministering to Muslims that complement his writings. Jacques de Vitry (ca. 1160–1240) remembered, "For several days he preached the Word of God to the Saracens and made little progress. The sultan, the ruler of Egypt, privately asked him to pray to the Lord for him, so that he might be inspired by God to adhere to that religion which most pleased God" (cited in McMichael, 2012: 127).

Francis's Christology appears evident in at least two aspects of his approach to Muslims. First, his initiative toward Muslims fulfilled a longing that he had for martyrdom—to witness unto Christ through suffering and even death. This motivated him in his initial attempt to sail to the Holy Land in 1212 and also in his initiative toward the Egyptian sultan in 1219 (Armstrong and Brady, 1982: 12–13; Tolan, 2009: 63–67). Imitating Christ the Good Shepherd who lays down his life, Francis offered these words to his monks going to Muslims or other resistant peoples:

And all the brothers, wherever they may be, should remember that they gave themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ. And for love of Him, they must make

themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible, because the Lord says, “Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it (cf. Lk 9:24) in eternal life (Mt 25:46).” (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 16.10–11; also Francis, *Rule* 10.10–12)

Upon learning of the death of five Friar Minors who had been sent to Morocco to preach to Muslims, Francis praised their martyrdoms and declared that he now truly had five brothers (Robson, 2012c: 46–47; Daniel, 2012: 244; Lawrence, 1994: 204).

Second, though Francis longed for martyrdom, his posture toward Muslims and nonbelievers reflected the peace of Christ the servant. In this section of the *Earlier Rule*, arguably written after Francis’s visit to the sultan, he wrote,

All my brothers: Let us pay attention to what the Lord says: *Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you*, for our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footprints we must follow, called his betrayer a friend and willingly offered himself to his executioners. Our friends, therefore, are all those who unjustly inflict upon us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martyrdom and death. We must love them greatly, for we shall possess eternal life because of what they bring us. (Francis, *Earlier Rule* 22.1–4, cited in McMichael, 2012: 134; also Francis, *Admonitions* 9)

Francis instructed the brothers to serve among Muslims in peace and humility and to avoid arguments and disputes while preaching the gospel. He illustrated these values through his own encounter with the sultan as he refrained from attacking Islam or the prophet Muhammad, and focused on proclaiming the gospel and praying for the sultan. Interestingly, Francis received safe passage to the sultan’s camp and was returned safely at the conclusion of their discussions. Francis’s value for peace in mission is quite significant given the context of the Crusades as well as the violent environment that he grew up in in Assisi, which prompted his own desire for war. While the medieval church opted for mission through conquest, Francis’s approach provides a counter-narrative of mission through peacemaking, proclamation, and service (Francis, *Rule* 3; Francis, *Admonitions* 15; McMichael, 2012: 128–129, 135; Daniel, 2012: 242; Robson, 2012c: 47; Short, 2012: 61; Tolan, 2009: 20).

Though Francis demonstrated a peaceful posture and valued dialogue, his gospel proclamation was uncompromising. He presented a trinitarian God; an incarnate Christ who was crucified, buried, and risen; a Holy Spirit that made the virgin birth of Christ possible; and he called for his Muslim listeners to repent and believe this message (Francis, *Rule* 11–12; Francis, *Admonitions* 1; Daniel, 2012: 243; McMichael, 2012: 132–133; Short, 2012: 55). Francis’s approach might be best described as “prophetic dialogue” (see Bevans, 2016: 3).

In short, in his ministry to Muslims, Francis was a man of peace longing for martyrdom. Communicating with a posture of peace and respect, Francis was also bold and clear in his proclamation and did not hedge on any difficult aspects of the gospel for Muslims. Finally, Francis embraced hardship, including shipwreck and sickness, on the way to meet Muslims. Undeterred by these obstacles, he demonstrated both a theology of suffering and perseverance that can be traced back to his view of Christ.

## Implications for mission today

What might the contemporary church glean from Francis's Christology applied in the work of mission? First, as the missional church strives to worship and follow Christ the Good Shepherd, suffering should be expected and accepted as part of God's plan. Following the murders of three Baptist medical workers in a hospital in Jibla, Yemen in 2002, former Southern Baptist International Mission Board president Jerry Rankin conveyed this value during a press conference carried live on CNN (2002): "Our personnel as Americans and Christians are well aware of the risk of living and serving in a place like Yemen . . . We would not choose to end our ministry and service because of risk and danger to our personnel . . . If we would, we would probably be ending our [work] in many of the countries throughout the world."

Second, Francis's example of peaceful martyrdom or what David Bosch called "bold humility" (1991: 489) should be emulated, particularly in contexts of potential hostility and violence. David Shenk, a Mennonite missionary for over five decades in Somalia, Kenya, and other parts of the Muslim world, has perhaps best modeled this value in contemporary mission. In his 2014 work, *Christian. Muslim. Friend*, Shenk emphasizes a posture of peace, friendship, and deliberate hospitality toward Muslims combined with boldness for communicating the essentials of the gospel, including the centrality of the cross, which can often be a stumbling block for Muslims. While living in a challenging Muslim environment in Somalia, Shenk remained quite open about his missionary identity, simply identifying himself as a messenger of Jesus the Messiah.

Third, the servant nature of Christ emphasized by Francis should continue to be celebrated by the church. In his 2010 groundbreaking work, *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter questions the "change the world" discourse of churches and mission organizations. Expanding on this, Todd Johnson and Cindy Wu (2015: 147) write, "The idea of 'changing the world' is entrenched in a pursuit of power that subverts the Christian gospel. We should instead love our neighbors, serving their good." Hunter urges Christians, who already experience God's presence in worship, to humbly pursue a faithful presence in their communities and make disciples. He writes (2010: 253), "I would suggest that a theology of faithful presence first calls Christians to attend to the people and places that they experience directly . . . the call of faithful presence gives priority to what is right in front of us—the community, the neighborhood, and the city, and the people of which these are constituted." In his new work entitled *Faithful Presence*, David Fitch builds on Hunter's thesis but asserts that a faithful presence can only be achieved as a community as the church witnesses unto Christ in its sphere of influence. Returning to Francis's emphasis on Christ as Servant, this faithful presence approach necessarily involves service as well as proclamation (2016: 12–14, 69–149; also Johnson and Wu, 2015: 164–186).

Finally, Francis's mendicant vision of Jesus as a poor man also instructs us in mission today. Though reading Francis's Christology through liberation lenses, Brazilian Catholic theologian Leonardo Boff makes some helpful suggestions to the global church with regard to the poor. He challenges the church to give sacrificially to the needs of the poor, to live among the poor, and to constantly ask, who are the



marginalized ones in society that need care? (1982: 75–79). Francis's thoughts on wealth and possessions also challenge intercultural missionaries to pursue simplicity and modesty in their standard of living, especially those serving in impoverished contexts. Finally, Francis's model should guide mission leaders, particularly those from the West with more access to financial resources, toward a proper regard for and use of money in mission. That is, money should not be used in an abusive manner to force unwanted agendas on local mission leaders. Rather, wealthier and poorer Christians and mission leaders should pursue equal partnership in mission collaboration.

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## Note

1. All of Francis's primary source works mentioned are from Armstrong and Brady (1982). Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are also from Armstrong and Brady.

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