

# THE YOUNG FRANCISCAN

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## Poverty

**Who** wants to be poor? Anyone??? When most people today hear the word 'poverty' they run the other way! It is simply an unattractive idea to give up all your wealth and be left with nothing.

A common question people ask themselves these days is, "what can I do to be richer – to have more?" That is certainly the question that the consumer culture wants us to ask. On the other hand, how many people have asked themselves, "what can I do to be poorer?"

The latter question is one that St Francis would have asked himself regularly. It was his desire to be the poorest of the poor. In fact, he even became envious if he met someone poorer than himself!

The gospels call us to a life of poverty, and St Francis lived this to the extreme, he literally owned nothing. However, is this really the poverty that the gospel calls each one of us to live?

The extreme poverty lived by Francis and his brothers was a particular calling given especially to them by God. God does not intend for each one of us to live poverty as harshly as Francis did. In fact, for most of us today who are called to care for our families and loved ones, it would be highly

irresponsible to live a life of strict poverty and fail to provide for our family's needs. God has a limit to how much 'poverty' each one of us is called to live, and it must always be according to our own life's situation.

On one hand, poverty can be understood as simplifying our lives from possessions that we don't really need. Another understanding of poverty comes to us from

the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus taught, "blessed are the poor in spirit." Poverty of spirit does not refer to our bank accounts, but rather to the inner desires of our spirit. Simply put, Jesus is calling our spirits to desire nothing at all, except God. He wants us to empty our spirits to become completely 'poor' from the desire of anything that takes our hearts away from holiness. God is a jealous God, he doesn't want to compete for our hearts, he wants our hearts to be entirely for him alone.

God does not want us to be poor without any money or possessions. He wants us to enjoy these gifts he has given us, but they must never become our desire.

Here is a test to see if we are truly poor in spirit. Each day ask yourself, "what was my greatest desire today – was it for God, or for something material and worldly?" If it was for worldly riches, then we are richer than what God wants us to be.



## Poverty or Charity?

As a young man, St Francis came from a very wealthy family. Despite being very 'worldly' in his youth, he was also known to give away his money charitably to the poor. So why then did Francis choose to live a life of total poverty himself, instead of continuing to use his own wealth for the good of the poor? Surely he could have aided many needy people?

For Francis, the greater calling was not to aid the poor, but to *be* the poor. By doing this he imitated Jesus, who from the crib to the cross lived in complete poverty, humility and obedience to the Father. This imitation became the inspiration for Francis. We are all called to imitate Jesus, although for most of us it will not be through a life of extreme poverty. As God the Father has provided us with many gifts, we too are called to imitate his spirit of generosity through works of charity towards those in need. The gifts we have been given are not intended for our good alone, but for the good of all, especially for those less fortunate than us. In the spirit of 'poverty' we should feel drawn to act with charity to those in need of our aid.

## Detachment

Have you ever heard someone say, "I can't live without my phone!" Really?!? Are people's lives going to end just because they don't have a phone on them 24/7? Perhaps you, or someone you know spends too many hours gaming. Or maybe some of us can't get enough of shopping for items just to get that buzz of consumer therapy.

'Poverty of spirit' can also be understood as 'detachment.' In such people the spirit of detachment has not been developed. They are not in control of their desires; rather, they are the ones being controlled!

Having a spirit of detachment from your wealth and possessions means that, even if you were to lose a large amount of money or an expensive item, although you would have genuine reason to feel annoyed, yet, such an incident would not extinguish your inner joy. You should be able to walk away and not miss what you have lost.

Detachment is distancing ourselves from our possessions. Detachment also helps us to see clearly which things are important to us, and to understand the difference between 'need', and 'desire'. We need food, clothing, a home, and yes, for most of us, we also need technology to get through everyday life. However, our desire should only ever be for God and for things that are holy in nature.

Imagine filling up your car with the wrong fuel. In order to fill it with the right fuel, you must first completely empty its tank before refilling. The tank must become 'poor'. Our souls are the same; when we fill it with the wrong desires, we can't allow God to enter. We must totally empty ourselves and become 'poor' from these desires and attachments, and only then can we allow God to refill us with his spirit.

## A Poor Church?

It is not uncommon to hear people criticizing the Catholic Church for its wealth and opulence. One only needs to walk into a major cathedral or basilica to see extravagant art works, richly ornamented alters, vessels, marble floors, and much more.

St Francis, the great lover of poverty, however did not seem to have a problem with this. Nowhere in any of his writings does he ever criticize the church for its magnificent buildings. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary. In his total love for the Eucharist, St Francis wanted churches to be kept beautiful to honour Jesus. He asked his friars to house the Blessed Sacrament with utmost respect, and in precious places. Francis also desired that beautiful chalices, corporals and alter cloths be used for the celebration of the Mass. In fact, he was critical of those priests who neglected to keep reverence towards such items.

Just as the lady at Bethany, who out of love for Jesus, poured expensive oil over his feet, Francis too, out of this same love, desired to offer an abundance of beauty to our Lord present within the church.

# The Poverty of Jesus

Imagine that poverty was a person, that all of its characteristics were personified and found in a real human. Among the earliest of Franciscan literature is found "The Sacred Exchange between St Francis and Lady Poverty" (*Sacrum commercium*). In the following adaptation of this text, we read of the personification of poverty, as Lady Poverty, conversing with St Francis.

St Francis, spoke with a most beautiful lady, her name was Poverty. The little poor man of Assis, contemplating the poverty of Jesus, said to her, "O Lady Poverty, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the creator of heaven and earth, desired your splendour and beauty. Even though the king was reclining at his table, rich and glorious in his kingdom, he left his house and gave up his inheritance searching for you, Poverty.

O Lady Poverty, how great must be your dignity, and how beyond compare your stature, that our Lord Jesus left behind all the ranks of angels and the immense powers to search for you, when all others held you in great contempt and ran from you as far as they could.

Before our Lord Jesus came to the earth from his radiant heavenly homeland, you Lady Poverty were already here preparing an appropriate place for him, a throne upon which he would sit, and a dwelling-place in which he would rest, that is, a very poor virgin from whom his birth would shine upon this world.

At his birth, you Lady Poverty greeted him with faithfulness so that in you, not in luxuries, he would find a place that would please him. He was placed in a poor manger because there was no room for him in the inn.

You, O Lady Poverty, were inseparable from him. You accompanied him throughout his entire life. When foxes had dens, and the birds of the sky had their nests, he nevertheless had nowhere to lay his head.

Then, when he opened his mouth to teach, the first words he uttered were to exalt you O Poverty: "Blessed are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

When Jesus chose his apostles to be the witnesses of his preaching, and of his glorious manner of living, he surely did not choose rich merchants, but poor fishermen, to show by such respect that Poverty was to be loved by all.

And finally, to reveal to everyone just how good Lady Poverty is, to show your magnificence, dignity and strength, and to show

how you, O beautiful lady, are greater than all other virtues, you were the one who clung to Jesus, the King of glory, when all his chosen and beloved ones fled in fear. You, most faithful spouse, did not abandon him for a moment. In fact, the more you saw him despised by everyone, the more you clung to him.

You, O Lady Poverty, were with him in the mockery of the Judeans, in the insults of the Pharisees, and in the curses of the chief priests. You were with him in the slapping of his face, in the spitting and in the scouring. Our Lord Jesus, who should have been respected by everyone, was mocked by everyone, but you alone comforted him. You did not abandon him even to death, death on a cross. And on that cross, his body stripped, his arms outstretched, his hands and feet pierced, you suffered with him, that nothing would appear more glorious in him than you.

And finally, when our Lord passed into heaven, he left you to mark the chosen ones with your seal, so that all who desire the kingdom of heaven must enter through you, Poverty."

# Secular Franciscan Saints



## Paul Pio Perazzo

1846-1911

Paul Pio Perazzo was a simple man from Turin, who spent most of his adult life working on the railways. He remained a bachelor his whole life, where he found he could better serve the Lord.

John found strength from the Eucharist and daily adoration. He joined the Franciscan Third Order in 1875 and devoted himself even more closely to the Church. However, Paul's love for the Church worked against him during the anti-Catholic culture of the day, and saw him faced much discrimination, resulting in the continual rejection of a pay rise, which was being received by other workers around him. After almost thirty years he was moved to a new position within the railways, however his workload became unreasonable, and his employers robbed him of his holidays. For a period of twenty years, he never received a promotion nor pay rise. After questioning the injustice, he was told that the government had no money for men of prayer. Paul was stood down from his work two years earlier prior to his retirement.

## Elizabeth of Austria

1554-1592

At the age of only fifteen, Elizabeth was married to King Charles IX of France, making her Queen. However, four years later when the king died, the nineteen-year-old resolved to devote her life solely to the service of God. Shortly after she entered the Franciscan Third Order. Dressed simply, so as to escape all notice, Elizabeth regularly visited churches to pray. When at home, she spend much time in prayer and avoided any activity that did not lead to God.

Elizabeth took much pleasure visiting the sick in hospitals, and visited homes throughout the city searching for the poor whom she could assist with medicines and other supplies. She was also known to invite the poor for a meal in her own home, especially on Thursdays in honour of our Lord's Last Supper. With a spirit of humility, Elizabeth was happy to do the lowliest of jobs. She preferred to put herself at the service of others rather than caring for her own needs. After twenty years of holy service, she died in Vienna, to the great sorrow of the entire city.

## Bl John of Peace

1353-1433

Born in Pisa, John Cini was a soldier by profession, and at one time was fighting in the war against the Florentine republic. His unit fell into ambush where nearly all of the soldiers were killed, except for a small number who survived, including himself who remained unharmed. In gratitude for his survival, from that moment on he vowed to spend the rest of his life in service to God.

John had desires to enter a monastery and commit himself to holy orders, however, due to his marital commitments, he entered the Third Order of St Francis. From that moment on he was drawn to live a life of penance and practice mortification, such as the wearing of heavy iron chains around his body. However, the largest portion of his life was spent in prayer and charity.

John founded a society in Pisa, where the members contributed some of their own funds, which was then distributed to the poor who were too ashamed to beg.

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