

# THE OBEDIENCE OF JESUS

## Through the Eyes of Francis of Assisi

*Ruth Evans*

IN HIS *LETTER TO THE ENTIRE ORDER*, written towards the end of his life, sometime between March 1220 and November 1223, Francis of Assisi asked the friars who disregarded their obedience within his order to do penance. He did not, he wrote, want to see or speak with them until they had done so. After speaking of the faults of the disobedient brothers, near to his conclusion, he added this comment:

I say this also regarding all the others, who go about aimlessly drifting, having disregarded the discipline of the Rule; since Our Lord Jesus Christ gave up His own life, rather than lose His obedience to His Most Holy Father.<sup>1</sup>

Here, Francis bases his request for penance and cooperation from the friars on the example of Jesus, an example stamped with the divine authority. Francis has already asserted the identity of Jesus as Son of God several times in this letter. He is clearly preoccupied by the divine Sonship and our responsibility of total response. In the second paragraph, Francis asks the friars to prostrate themselves upon hearing the name of 'Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High'. Later he talks of the reverent awe due to the eucharistic presence of Christ on the altar, using phrases that emphasize the transcendent height from which Jesus gives himself. Assertions such as these emphasize the dignity of Christ and his right to worship. The contact between Jesus and ourselves in the sacrament, Francis points out, is not inevitable, but the result of condescension on Jesus' part that amazes our thought and to which the only appropriate response is our self-surrender.

<sup>1</sup> Francis of Assisi, *A Letter to the Entire Order*, my translation.

It is clear that Francis' devotion to the humble and poor Christ in no way detracted from his appreciation of the majesty of Christ as God. He brings his letter to a climax with the quoted reference to the self-sacrificing nature of the sovereignty of Jesus. Francis juxtaposes the selfless orientation of Jesus, who retained his inward direction towards God until death, with the aimless wandering of some of the friars. His appeal to the friars is based on the knowledge that Jesus, though Son of God, came to know the depths of our condition and acted for us from those depths, losing his human life. I should like to explore Francis' understanding of the obedience of Christ here.

### ***The Concerns of Francis for His Order***

Francis was obviously concerned with the crucial question of direction in the religious life that he had founded. The Franciscan order was rapidly expanding and its relationship with its inspired founder had become complex and uneasy. Francis himself had by this time surrendered his external authority, for reasons that were probably painful. Many of the new friars were critical of Francis' vision of a gospel life. The sources suggest that towards the end of his life the founder suffered through rejection.<sup>2</sup> Francis combined great personal holiness with highly demanding expectations, and his vision was not accessible or appealing to all his followers.<sup>3</sup> The saint struggled to respond to the insults that came his way in patient humility<sup>4</sup> and to accept the humiliations placed on him by his health and by the tensions within the fraternity. The surrender of his authority must have highlighted his position as a vulnerable and sick man on the periphery of his own order.

Francis' personal journey was pressing for him as he was moving towards his death. He was too ill to travel. He did not possess authority over the friars in any legal sense, yet continued to bear a sense of concern and responsibility for them. He is anxious, as he writes, to stress his infirmity, his ignorance and the professed weakness of his mind: 'I am ignorant and an uneducated man'. In this way he expresses that he is not claiming to offer counsel from a position of

<sup>2</sup> See *The Assisi Compilation*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, *The Founder*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 2000), 145–146.

<sup>3</sup> *The Assisi Compilation*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> *The Assisi Compilation*, 126.

legal authority or personal competence. He attributes nothing to his own powers. He describes himself as 'a useless man'. Given the literalism of Francis, his words are more than an expression of his humility. He seems to have felt humanly futile.

The letter repeatedly shows a preoccupation with intention and with purity of heart, themes that tie in with the comment about Jesus. The way that the friars behave and their motivation as they travel are more than a matter of their external observance. The question of direction, the way that a friar responds to an external challenge from his internal commitment, is a central one about the life of the order and the relationship between its members and God. In the nomadic existence of the friars, there was a great deal of scope for multiple interpretations of what they were about, and some of them were ignoring the Rule.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, Francis is writing in a very practical and troubled context. He is clearly anxious to defend his priorities. His request for the obedience of the friars emerges in a situation that was no doubt confused for many of the brothers involved. There is no reason to suppose that in the environment of the rapidly expanding order every brother had a clear sense of what he ought to be doing or how to orientate his journey towards God. Indeed, the very rapid success of the Franciscan movement, as an outward phenomenon probably contributed to a sense of confusion about priorities, since external development and inner certitude do not necessarily keep pace with one another.

Francis touches, simply and powerfully, on the issue of interiority and its relationship with outward practice. An exemplary relationship between personal volition and obedience is movingly illustrated by his brief comment on the behaviour of Jesus. Jesus in his passion received virtually no recognition and was stripped of everything that made his divine Sonship credible to others. But he did not disavow his Sonship. On the contrary, he defended it even from within this tortured situation.

Francis knew what it meant to cast himself radically upon the Fatherhood of God when he disowned his own father, along with his prospects, money and position in society.<sup>6</sup> He is preoccupied in the passage cited with the priority of Jesus, who was always turned towards

<sup>5</sup> *The Assisi Compilation*, 212–213.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Legend of the Three Companions* in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, 79–80.

the Father. Characteristically, Francis emphasizes Jesus' submission to the Father.<sup>7</sup>

His observation, succinct as it is, could easily be read only in the context of Francis' concerns about the order. But it merits a more detailed examination. It is beautiful and full of insight, and contrasts sharply with his earlier picture of Jesus in fearful Godhead. As an unexpected window on the interior life of Jesus in the exposure of great loss, it is startling and moving. As an invitation to love Jesus and to imitate him in his obedience, it softens the tone of stern reproach to the friars. In a letter very much concerned with issues of authority, it represents the vulnerable authority of the Son of God, whose teaching mandate and

self-disclosure were challenged to the point of death. As such it is the most compelling statement in the whole letter, bringing it to a climax.

The Latin word that Francis uses for Jesus' relinquishment of his life is *dedere*, a strong word meaning 'to yield possession of, to surrender', suggesting a complete abandonment of self. This is balanced by the contrasting use of the verb *perdere*, another strong word, which can mean 'to ruin, destroy, waste, hurt, cease to possess'. Jesus will not allow any harm to come to his relationship with his Father. His strength, unlike the brute strength with which he is confronted, resides in the ability to hand over his life.



St Francis in Meditation, by Zurburán

<sup>7</sup> Norbert Nguyen-Van-Khanh has pointed out that it is the obedience of Jesus rather than his poverty that Francis portrays as the primary characteristic of Jesus' relationship with his Father. However he also shows that there is a close connection between these two characteristics. See Norbert Nguyen-Van-Khanh, *The Teacher of His Heart: Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St Francis* (New York: St Bonaventure UP, 1994), 141.

### ***The Obedience of Christ on Trial***

Characteristically, Francis emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, the fact that in his obedience he endured injustice of a kind that many of us, mercifully, do not have to endure. Jesus gave assent to God within a place of degradation, in a situation where he was seized and dispossessed. Francis has already heavily stressed the majesty of Christ earlier in the letter. Consequently, the divine authority of Jesus' disposition during the passion, as he surrenders to complete humiliation, is underscored. In his obedience, Jesus became subject to the kinds of psychological harassment that are sometimes inflicted upon prisoners, including challenges to their inmost loyalties. Such a threat is deeply wounding and humiliating even when, as in the case of Jesus, the prisoner possesses the moral strength not to succumb to any fault or sin as a result of his or her circumstances. This acceptance of anguish is an example of the way Jesus participated fully in the sufferings of fallen humanity. His divine majesty, as defined by Francis therefore, is expressed in an obedient surrender to innocent suffering. This is true to the gospel account of Jesus, who places his passion in a context of freely chosen obedience to the Father, saying, 'am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?' (John 18:11).

The encounter most explicitly evoked by Francis is the scene in which Jesus stands before the Sanhedrin and is asked by Caiaphas whether he is the Son of the living God:

Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, 'This fellow said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days"'. The high priest stood up and said, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God'. Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.' Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death'. Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?' (Matthew 26:59–68)

This is the scene in which Jesus prefers to lose his life than to refuse obedience to his Father. He is physically defenceless and his freedom has been taken from him. He is under arrest, separated from his followers, and is being tried illegally at night. One of his followers has betrayed him and as a reward has already been paid the price of blood.

So far the proceedings have failed to produce the death sentence, which is the object of the court. False evidence about Jesus' teaching is superseded by a question about his identity. Caiaphas, who possesses the highest authority in Israel, puts Jesus on oath in the name of the living God and asks him if he is the Son of God. An affirmation of this identity will be accompanied by certain condemnation.

Jesus is fully aware of the irregularity and corruption of the proceedings, as his silence in response to the initial questioning shows. He has been seized from a life in which he was teaching daily in the Temple (Luke 21:37–38) and living in the company of his disciples (Luke 22:28). Now he stands undefended as the high priest exploits the facts of his life and ministry to accuse him. During this trial he must be suffering the ache of abandonment and anxiety for the future. As he faces the prejudiced court, he can see that his human life and work will be squandered. His followers are already scattered.

Before the Sanhedrin we see a cornered man, but one majestically in possession of his own loyalties. To Jesus, the intimate, morally and intellectually dishonest questioning of Caiaphas about his identity can only be threatening and repulsive. Jesus is not spared the final loss hingeing on the interrogation—that of his life. Jesus is asked on solemn oath if he is the Son of God. To obey is to witness to the Father, even if this witness is rejected. The ugliness of the scene highlights the stature of Jesus' testimony. Regardless of his peril, Jesus gives priority to God, a heroism that in itself should have given the high priest and his colleagues pause for thought. Caiaphas uses the name of God to serve his own ends. He invokes it in order to compel God's Son to condemn himself to death out of his own mouth.

While Jesus clearly feels entitled to withhold any response for much of the trial, he does not refuse to answer this direct question posed by the high priest. Whatever the high priest's motive, he poses a question with real, indeed ultimate, substance. Caiaphas possesses the legal and religious authority to ask the question and places Jesus on

oath in the name of God. The fact that Jesus does give an answer demonstrates his refusal to compromise his fidelity to the Father.

When he refers to these events, Francis does not present obedience as an assured solution to external problems and conflicts, nor as a guarantee of survival, and certainly not as a personal vindication in any worldly sense. It is presented simply as an act of loyalty to God. If the scene of Christ before the Sanhedrin is an indicator, there is no certainty that obedience to God will earn human respect. Jesus' trial has been staged so that he will immediately suffer for his obedience. By identifying the obedience asked of the friar with the obedience of the Son in this way, Francis points to the unity that ought to exist between the friars and the Trinity—to the fact that true life within the order can only proceed from the life of the Trinity, whatever the cost. Having cautioned the brothers to have respect for the words of God and for the Eucharist, Francis points to the heroic deference that Jesus showed to God in his trial testimony.

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Francis balances the conformity of the Son with the Father's right to ask for obedience from Him. The brothers are not engaged in an enterprise based on their own initiatives and choices. At a time when there was a great deal of interest in the external effectiveness and usefulness of the order, Francis is making the point that the direction of the order is not, ultimately, to be measured by external results. The life of the fraternity is an expression of the inner life of God, a participation in the bond of love that exists between Son and Father, graciously extended to us in the obedience of the Son.

Francis was a frail man who had been opposed by his own brothers. In *The Little Flowers*, he tells a story in which he defines perfect joy in terms of his own patient response to humiliation, rejection and abandonment, rather than in the success of his order. This seeming contradiction can only be understood in terms of Francis' desire to be subject to others in order to be conformed to Jesus in his passion. If, as it seems, this story is a parable of his inner journey, he knew what it was like to feel irrelevant and unwanted before those who should have received him.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *True and Perfect Joy*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 1, *The Saint*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 166–167.

The sources tell us that Francis tried to deal with irresolvable conflicts in the order by presenting himself as an example, rather than an ‘executioner’, to the brothers<sup>9</sup> and by fulfilling ‘in himself’ the word of God so that it ‘would not return to Him empty’.<sup>10</sup> He must have identified with the loneliness and human weariness of Jesus standing before the high priest. He must have had insight into the immense burden of responsibility on Jesus’ shoulders in this terrible scene. We know that Francis frequently meditated upon it, because it is the subject of the second psalm in his own liturgical work, *The Office of the Passion*.<sup>11</sup> He recited this prayer daily for years.

In his isolation, the condemned man of the psalm is portrayed as thinking of his mother and of his birth. Francis draws attention to the suffering inflicted by the death sentence with great accuracy and realism—I shall look at the way Francis does this later.

We are not to think of the persecution Jesus suffered as an external phenomenon which left him inwardly unassailed and unbruised. Both in the passage quoted from the *Letter to the Entire Order* and in the second psalm of his *Office of the Passion*, Francis indicates how profound and personal the harassment that Jesus suffered was. The challenge of his enemies opposes the deepest knowledge that Jesus has of his own person as possessed by God. What can be more intimate for him than his bond with the Father? Communicating this sacred knowledge of himself to human beings is the reason for the incarnation (John 3:16). Jesus’ refusal to compromise his relationship with his Father is a direct response to the shocking fact that he has been pressured to do so.

In the *Letter to the Entire Order* Francis plainly shows that the human and the divine consciousness of this man cannot be dislocated, as though the human being could be within the striking distance of his enemies while the divine Son remained serenely out of reach. Since Jesus is a man, through him God has come within the reach of human

<sup>9</sup> *The Assisi Compilation*, 211–212. See also 225–226. The fact that Francis expressed himself so strongly suggests how ambivalent he may have been about the exercise of authority in a legal sense, seeing it as something susceptible to the coercive methods of the world. It may also indicate a humane fear on his part that by enforcing his own priorities he might inadvertently bring harm to those he set out to serve. This sensitive awareness of the human dignity of others, combined with fear of the potential worldliness in his own personality, is characteristic of Francis.

<sup>10</sup> *The Assisi Compilation*, 206.

<sup>11</sup> Francis created a series of original psalms by reassembling carefully selected fragments taken from the Vulgate book of Psalms. The first six psalms in this series depict scenes from the passion of Christ. The series also celebrates the resurrection.





*Christ and Caiaphas, by Caracciolo*

beings. Knowing himself to be the eternal Son of God constitutes the innermost identity of this imprisoned human being.

During the trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus' personal identity as Son of God—revealed to men and women out of sheer grace for their salvation—is subjected to a merciless interrogation. He is challenged to disown his relationship with God or die. His enemies probably do not grasp the truth of his claim about himself, but they understand its centrality to his teaching, its importance to him, and the legal vulnerability that a claim of equality to God entails. The interrogation succeeds in being both astute and treacherous. Jesus is interrogated and condemned on the basis of his own authority. His teaching about himself is the basis for the challenge, and no attempt is made to see if his words are open to discussion, enquiry or belief. They are merely used as a snare, the occasion to condemn him. The act of condemnation implicitly denounces his authority in declaring himself to be the Son, a denunciation that is intended to be definitive.

The scene depicts Jesus driven into a crisis. Jesus retains the power to assert his bond with his Father, but the court has power over his

body and his future on the earth. Jesus' mission as teacher, healer and prophet is the way he has been destined and commanded to express himself on earth as the Father's Son. All of this is being decried and destroyed. Although Jesus never experienced the suffering that comes from a sense of personal sin, he could and did experience the anxiety and distress of receiving punishment and appearing sinful for the sake of upright actions. It is painful to be coldly asked any highly personal question in public, particularly when this is accompanied by an automatic assumption of guilt.

Francis has stressed in his *Letter to the Entire Order* that the divine Sonship of Christ ought to make us tremble in reverent fear. But Jesus is true to himself before Caiaphas, in the face of long ensuing hours of dishonour and abuse. As always, Francis writes with sensitivity to Jesus' inner world. In my initial quotation, Francis reflects upon the obedience of Jesus under duress. What is it, Francis is implicitly asking, that Jesus ultimately secured against violation? What is it that he retained? In this way Francis draws our attention, not primarily to the tragic external attack on Jesus, but to Jesus' own response. This response brings something more than tragedy to the scene. Something of ultimate consequence has to be defended and preserved by Jesus at this moment. He safeguards his relationship to the Father with the only freedom left to him, that of his volition. On the point of condemnation, he retains the power to say, 'You have said so' (Matthew 26:64). Thus as the Son is condemned as a criminal, He affirms His identity in the Father. He affirms the truth of His own words about God, the truth of His claim that He is the Son of God. Everything He speaks is spoken out of obedience, in his loyalty to the truth, so that others will know the truth. He is responsible to His truth that is for us. As His apparent credibility as a witness to the truth is stripped from Him, the integrity of that truth is defended for all generations.

Since Jesus is the Word, all his actions are there for us to ponder and imitate. The quotation from the *Letter to the Entire Order* clearly presupposes that we should follow Jesus in a literal way, something that Francis himself faithfully put into practice. As usual, Francis' interpretation of the inner motivation of Jesus is revealing.

Jesus' testimony before this court cannot be taken as a model for ourselves unless we consider first what exactly obedience meant to the man who is testifying. The relationship between Son and Father is

expressed in the obedience of the Son. This obedience is an expression of the Son's love for the Father (John 14:31) and a testimony to the holiness of God. Their relationship has been ordered like this from all eternity. In the midst of false accusation Jesus holds on to this truth. Hence the scene maintains an assurance of hope and strength for future Christians, including the friars addressed by Francis. In this sense it is optimistic and offers encouragement to the struggling brothers. Jesus asserts the absolute sovereignty of God and the primacy of relationship to God.

Francis asserts that Jesus wanted—and wanted totally—to retain the obedience to the Father that he possesses as Son of God. The tension in the quotation arises from the fact that Jesus needed to defend this obedience. Because Jesus is a man, his beliefs and loyalties can be opposed in the arena of an unjust human court. His identity can be denied and scorned. This opposition is astounding when we consider the dignity of Christ as Son of the Father (repeatedly emphasized by Francis) and the eternal integrity of His relationship with the Father. Jesus' desire to maintain and express the obedience to the Father that he possesses as Son means finally that he places himself at the mercy of men, who shamelessly do what God does not want. From all eternity the Word has been turned towards and conformed to the Father (John 1:1). Before Caiaphas, we see the Son brought to the point of having to defend His own Godhead. In the quoted scene, God reveals Himself and His truth before men at the same instant that He enters into their clutches. The perfection of Jesus' obedience is not dependent on any appearance of support from God. The obedience of Jesus arises out of his perfect knowledge of the Father as His Son (John 1:18). God is revealed in the Son's relinquishment of His life. Obedience drives Jesus into a deepening and tragic engagement with human disobedience.

### ***The Trauma of the Death Sentence***

The plight of Jesus as he stands trial before the Sanhedrin is one of the main themes of Francis' second psalm in his *Office of the Passion*. The scene, as described by Francis, graphically illustrates the solidarity of Jesus with persecuted and abused people, all those who feel their sources of life to be under threat in ways that are unbearable. Jesus is shown paying the full price for Caiaphas' treachery. He experiences isolation, dread for the future, an unanswered longing for a companion.

Lord, God of my salvation,  
day and night I cried out before you.

May my prayer enter into your sight;  
incline your ear to my request.

See to my soul and liberate it,  
because of my enemies all over me.

Since it is you who drew me from the womb,  
you my hope from my mother's breasts,  
from the womb I was thrust into you.

From my mother's womb you are my God;  
do not move away from me.

You know my disgrace and my confusion,  
and my reverence.

In your sight are all who trouble me;  
my heart expected disgrace and misery.

I looked for someone  
who would grieve together with me  
and there was no one;  
and for someone who would console me  
and I found no one.

O God, the wicked have risen against me,  
the synagogue of the mighty have sought my life;  
they have not placed you in their sight.

I have been numbered with those  
who go down into the pit;  
I have become as one without help,  
free, but among the dead.

You are my most holy Father,  
My King and my God.

Make haste to help me,  
Lord, God of my salvation!

In this psalm Jesus recalls the presence of his Father as the One who upholds him in the very first moments of his human life, a reminder that through the Incarnation the relationship of the Son with the Father acquires the perspective of human dependence and need. The plight of the man is seen in the light of the defencelessness of the newborn child: 'Since it is you who drew me from the womb, you my hope from my mother's breasts' (v.4).<sup>12</sup> This human vulnerability, felt and voiced in prayer, casts a poignant light on the scenario of the trial. The suffering of Christ, as portrayed by Francis in these psalms, is a supreme testimony to the Father. It is also portrayed as real pain and helplessness. As Francis indicates in psalm two, Jesus knows in advance as he testifies what the consequence will be, that he will be thrown into a void: 'In your sight are all who trouble me; my heart expected disgrace and misery' (v.7).

The word for 'trouble' here, *tribulant*, means 'press' or 'extract', indicating the way that Christ's inner nature is cynically explored in the hunt for a conviction. God's sacred being, the holy of holies, is shamelessly cross-examined. The word for expected, *expectavit*, can suggest hopeful expectation. But here it expresses that Jesus can only anticipate condemnation. It is clear from his public ministry that the misuse of the things of God, the attempt to manipulate Jesus' power to satisfy human suspicion and scorn, are a source of suffering to Jesus (Mark 8:11–13). Francis emphasizes the absence of human support for Jesus at this moment of his witness to his Father. Jesus must have hoped to declare himself to be Son, the truth on which the salvation of humanity depends, before a more receptive audience. The court uses his divine Sonship, which is the bond of unity between God and humanity, to condemn him. No one accepts the truth that he has spoken. No one protests against the guilty verdict.

Francis expresses Jesus' human craving for support, for understanding: 'I looked for someone who would grieve together with me and there was no one; and for someone who would console me and I found no one' (v.8). These psalm verses clearly affirm Jesus' sense of rejection and loneliness: 'I have been numbered with those who go

<sup>12</sup> The translation is taken from Laurent Gallant and Andre Cirino, *The Geste of the Great King: Office of the Passion of Francis of Assisi* (New York: St Bonaventure UP, 2001), 49–51.



*A death row inmate, from the film Dead Man Walking*

down into the pit; I have become as a man without help, free, but among the dead' (v.10). The word for 'numbered' here, *aestimatus*, can signify an estimate in monetary terms and a financial value has in fact already been placed on Jesus' life in the payment of Judas. Jesus is 'among the dead' because, once condemned, he is regarded as a dead man while he lives. The modern equivalent for this status would be that of a death row prisoner.

Francis had direct experience of the plight of outcasts in his own society. This psalm expresses Francis' understanding of what it means to be regarded as among the living dead. Francis was drawn to show mercy to the people in his society—lepers—who had lost their legal right to life.<sup>13</sup> His harrowing portrait of the trauma of the death sentence in psalm two is true to the documented facts. It ought to be recalled that, as I write, prisoners in the United States, and in other parts of the world, continue to exist under the death sentence, the experience of which has been shown to cause insanity. Many exonerated death row prisoners in the United States never fully recover from the irreversible psychological damage they have endured.<sup>14</sup> It has been estimated that

<sup>13</sup> See *The Legend of the Three Companions*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2, 74.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra D. Westervelt and Kimberly J. Cook, 'Coping with Innocence after Death Row', *Contexts*, 7/4 (2008), 32–37.

half of the death row inmates there suffer from severe mental health problems. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly the intense anxiety created by anticipating premeditated execution.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Testimony of Christ***

Francis makes an important addition of his own to one of the psalm verses that he borrows from the Vulgate Psalter. In the penultimate line he adds the phrase *Tu es sanctissimus pater meus*, 'You are my most holy Father', to the section of Psalm 43 that he is using, creating a revised verse that reads: 'You are my most holy Father, My king and my God' (v.11).<sup>16</sup>

Since, in the passion psalm, Jesus is depicted as crying out these words to God, Francis shows that his obedience to God is expressed through prayer. By choosing to voice the holiness of God through the mouth of Jesus at this moment, Francis represents Jesus' commitment to the sanctity of his Father at the moment of his solemn witness and condemnation. By adding the word 'Father' to the original text, Francis emphasizes the personal and filial nature of the testimony that Jesus is making. Francis clearly wants to concentrate on Jesus' orientation towards his Father while he is being cross-examined. Jesus has defended the holiness of the Father in this trial in preference to his own survival. And the holiness of the Father is precisely expressed in the Son's willingness to lay down His life. Jesus' attitude of submission to God is indicated by the word 'king'. The divine authority of the Son stands revealed, not in a glorious triumph, but in the obedience of a humiliating defeat.

Jesus has asserted his own identity as proceeding from 'my Father'. To deny Sonship would also be to deny the Father, whose holiness and self-gift reside in this relationship, since only the Son possesses the love of the Father in this unique way.<sup>17</sup> Jesus expresses the life of the Father

<sup>15</sup> See Hannah Robertson Miller, "A Meaningless Ritual": How the Lack of a Postconviction Competency Standard Deprives the Mentally Ill of Effective *Habeas* Review in Texas', *Texas Law Review*, 87/1 (2008), 267–298.

<sup>16</sup> In the NRSV, this is Psalm 44: 4.

<sup>17</sup> The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that Christ 'prays to the Father and addresses him familiarly, not merely as a man placed opposite to God but as fullness, that is, also as the Father's eternal Son', (*Christian Meditation* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984], 60). In the parable of the vineyard Jesus identifies himself with the vineyard owner's 'own beloved son' (Luke 20: 13). See also John 3: 16.

even as he loses his legal right to exist. He refuses to betray the Father, even as he is betrayed. The brutal context of Jesus' declaration stands in tragic contrast with this complete knowledge of God that Jesus claims to possess. No human being has claimed to know God in this perfect way before, a fact that the verdict of blasphemy tacitly acknowledges. The words that this verse of the psalm give to the condemned man express Jesus' own sense of the responsibility of his testimony to God.

### ***Francis Clarifies the Meaning of Christian Obedience***

Francis' sense of his own weakness, even powerlessness, makes his insight into the imprisonment of Jesus compelling. By taking the obedience of Jesus as the starting point and impetus for the friars' obedience to God he clarifies the inner life of the Son and the life that the friars derive from Him. It is this profound relationship between the obedience of Jesus to the Father and the obedience that the friars should strive to realise that gives meaning and structure to the Franciscan life. By showing the Son to us in this way, Francis places the life of the order in a Trinitarian context. The will of God comes to pass through the surrender of the Son in human weakness and powerlessness. Loyalty to God brings Jesus into solidarity with the most abandoned people in our world. Challenged on his loyalty to the Father in the most desperate human context, Jesus did not rescue his own life. True obedience, therefore, is an act of inner surrender to God's will and the faithful performance of that will. As such, it is an act of supreme love for God and has priority over all other claims.

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