

THE MARIAN ANTIPHON OF FRANCIS BERNARDONE

A Reflection upon the Virgin Mary's Relationship with Her Son in the *Office of the Passion of St Francis*

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WE KNOW FROM THE BIOGRAPHIES of Saint Francis of Assisi that his relationship with Jesus was passionate, a gift from God that came naturally to his intense personality. Francis was consumed by this relationship in a way that some people might envy. The biographies describe how he experienced the relationship with Jesus with his emotions as well as with his heart and intellect, often crying and mourning over the suffering of Jesus and also of his mother.¹ Nonetheless, we might feel disappointed that Francis, in his recorded writings, does not write more personally and intimately about these deep encounters and does not offer us more of his own private insights into the life of the incarnate Word. What he does tell us tends to be brief, though very penetrating and revealing. It would seem that, for all his extrovert delight in verbally communicating Christ to others, Francis, understandably, wanted to place a limit on his self-disclosure.

There is, however, among his works an exception to this reticence, at least as it applies to Jesus. The longest meditation on the life of Jesus that we have from Francis is his *Office of the Passion* which is written principally, not from his own words, but using psalm fragments from the Latin Vulgate. The creativity of Francis the composer manifests itself in the way that he rearranges these psalm pieces, taken from their original context in the psalter and reassembled according to Francis' word-picture to create a series of fifteen new psalms. On a few occasions phrases from the New Testament are also used. Sometimes Francis changes a word or

¹ See *The Legend of Three Companions*, 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, 2000), 76–77.

two in his biblical source, substituting for it a word that better fits his meaning. We are not hearing Francis' own direct words but a series of carefully arranged quotations. The result, though disarmingly simple and restrained, is a perceptive series of portraits of the inner life of the incarnate Word, expressed as though from Jesus' own mouth. Francis does this so well that we actually feel as if we are hearing Jesus speaking as he moves through the culminating events of his life. The first seven psalms of this sequence narrate the story of the passion and resurrection.

We know that Francis was painfully separated from a mother whom he loved because of a path of conversion which he believed was directed by God. Although Pica tried to help and defend her son against his aggrieved father,² eventually she was separated from Francis as the rift between him and her husband became more entrenched. Francis would have known what it was like to see pain inflicted on his mother when his relationship with his father, Pietro Bernardone, broke down completely. According to the sources Francis was never reunited with his parents. We know that he became distressed when his father publicly cursed him as he passed him in the street, to the point that he needed to ask a beggar to speak words of comfort to ease the pain.³ We can assume he missed his mother, who seems to have had a kind and gentle nature. The pain of separation would have given him insight into the experience of Mary, who was separated from her son first by his public ministry and then by his death.

The Marian Antiphon

A sense of Mary's constant witness to her son can be gathered by studying the relationship between the psalms and the *Antiphon* in Francis' *Office of the Passion*. This Marian *Antiphon* is another word-picture, a portrait of Mary that appears at the beginning and end of each psalm. But whereas the psalms describe a dynamic course of events, the *Antiphon* is always the same. Whereas Jesus speaks in the psalms, Mary is merely described. The effect is that of a still, silent figure watching an unfolding narrative. As the story told by the psalms emerges, the *Antiphon* acquires an enormous depth, encompassing as it does the developing love between mother and son—the sinless Virgin and the incarnate Word—this woman and the condemned man. The implications of the *Antiphon* are gradually revealed through its continuous relationship with the psalm sequence. This is how Mary's

² *Legend of Three Companions*, 79.

³ *Legend of Three Companions*, 82.

relationship with her son is suggested. An analogy can be drawn with a stained-glass window whose beauty grows and alters in relation to the changing course of the light that infuses it throughout the day. Mary's ever-deepening union with her son can be perceived when we enter into the implied relationship between the psalm sequence and this *Antiphon*. Though the voice of Jesus is heard speaking throughout the psalms, Mary is always silent. It is as if she is surrendered to her pain, which is beyond words. Her presence at the passion scenes acquires meaning only in relation to her son, in relation to what he says and suffers. The link between psalms and *Antiphon* casts an emerging light on this. It is as if there is a dialogue between the man



Mater dolorosa, by Hans Memling

and the woman to which we almost have access, although the woman does not speak, or as if in her silence she says all that she has to say.

Mary is mentioned in the psalms themselves, but very briefly: twice in the passion psalms, in psalms two and five. She is also mentioned in psalm fifteen, which focuses on the nativity. All through the psalms we can infer a likeness between her dispositions and the words put into the mouth of Jesus. It is through the *Antiphon* that Francis characterizes Mary and indicates her relationship with everything that happens to Jesus in the psalm narrative. The *Antiphon* says this:

Holy Virgin Mary, there is no one like you born in the world among women: Daughter and Handmaid of the most high, sovereign King, the heavenly Father; Mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ; Spouse of the Holy Spirit, pray for us with Saint Michael the archangel and with all the powers of the heavens and with all the saints, together with your most holy beloved Son, Lord and Teacher.⁴

⁴ The translation is from Laurent Gallant and Andre Cirino, *The Geste of the Great King: Office of the Passion of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Saint Bonaventure UP, 2001), 219–220.

Francis, notably, is describing Mary not in ornate symbolic language but very concretely, in her relationship with the members of the Trinity, coming to a focus on her relationship with her son.

All of the phrases that Francis chooses illuminate her stance beneath the cross, but I have room here to discuss just three. The first is *non est tibi similis nata in mundo in mulieribus*, 'there is no one like you born in the world among women'. This opening phrase is part of an older antiphon used by monks to celebrate the feast of the Assumption. Francis' *Antiphon* is a development of this older prayer dating from two or three centuries before him.⁵

Mary is born into the world. She comes into the world in the same way that we all do. Her life is lived out in this world, the world where all of us live out our lives. She is a member of the human race. She has a destiny and it is the destiny of a woman. Though we may tend to focus on the extraordinary aspects of her existence, in so many ways, including the experience of uncertainty, weariness and pain, she is like us. Her humanity is that of another woman. The word *nata*, born, emphasizes the bodily existence of Mary. Her feeling for her son is the feeling of a mother for her child. Mary is in this world and therefore she suffers. She has a mind and body capable of happiness and of pain, capable of delight in her son and of anxiety on his behalf. She has human hopes for him. Scripture recalls that an unnamed woman in one of the crowds that followed Jesus cried out in admiration at the sheer natural marvel, that a woman should be the mother of such a son (Luke 11:27–28).

And yet, no other woman is like Mary. The word Francis uses for woman, *mulier*, is the word used in the Vulgate by Jesus when he addresses Mary as woman from the cross (John 19:26). The woman who stands at the foot of the cross has a unique dignity, which is known to her son, though to onlookers she is merely pitiable. She looks at the suffering of her son from the perspective of her sinlessness. The treatment of Mary's son, as it is described in Francis' psalms, contrasts harshly with the sensitivity and insight with which Francis describes the matchless privileges of Mary in the *Antiphon*. The painstaking way in which Francis describes the soul of Mary in this *Antiphon* reflects the detailed personal knowledge God has of her and God's immense care for her. God has created in love

⁵ The ancient antiphon reads, 'Virgin Mary, among women, there is no one like you born into the world, beauteous as a rose, fragrant as a lily, pray for us before your Son'. See Leonard Lehmann, 'Francis's Marian Prayers', *Greyfriars Review*, 13/1 (1999), 1–19.

the dignity and beauty of her unique soul. This contrasts with Mary's fate when the son that she loves is abandoned.

We can see here, implicitly, Francis' awareness of the God-given dignity of the most forsaken members of society—lepers, those who had no recognised social existence. The mother of God shares her son's final entry into humanity's most abandoned group. Each passion psalm crosses a terrible distance, and at the beginning and end of each psalm Mary is still there, having followed the journey created by the experience of her son. The *Antiphon* reveals the place of constant love in her heart for him. The abuse suffered by her son in the psalms intensifies but her loyalty to him does not waver. Her love always travels the distance covered by the psalm. The *Antiphon* always states that he is her beloved son and this is always in relation to the content of the psalms. The same can be said of the psalms that will follow and describe the resurrection.

The phrase *dilectum Filium*, beloved Son, evokes a long and profound story of familiarity, tender memories, incidents and anecdotes. Every loving mother and her child have such a story. The phrase suggests human intimacy, the shared knowledge and mutual experience of son and mother. It suggests the capacity of their love. It also suggests the human neediness of Jesus: to be her son means to have been small, dependent, vulnerable and in need of help. On many occasions he must have turned to her. Equally, in many times of weariness and anxiety his presence must have uplifted her. The phrase suggests the meaning Jesus has for Mary as her only son, their fulfilled relationship. The phrase that Francis uses here for Mary's relationship with Jesus is the same phrase that is frequently used for the Father's relationship with His eternal Son in the psalm sequence.⁶

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We have, consequently, a presentation of the two great filial bonds corresponding to the two natures of Jesus, the fact that he is son of Mary and Son of the Father. This points to Jesus' fulfilment of the tasks, responsibilities and affective ties due to his human nature as well as his eternal bond with the Father. It is not as if his human nature has to suffer some kind of incompleteness for the sake of the other, as if to be truly Son of God Jesus has to be less than a real man. It is not as if his love for his mother remains incomplete and distant for the sake of his Father. Mary his mother is herself the obedient daughter of the Father, as

⁶ For example, psalms 7:3, 9:2 and 15:3 of Francis' *Office*.



Pietà, by Giovanni Bellini

her *Antiphon* affirms. Indeed, it is her obedience to God as *ancilla* or handmaid at Jesus' conception that permits the Son of God to come into the world (Luke 1:38). Mary's obedience to the Father accompanies her son's obedience, stressing her role as his silent companion, associate and fellow sufferer as the scenes of his life unfold. The presence of Mary, conveyed through the word-picture of Francis' *Antiphon*, invites us to look at the life and suffering of Jesus through Mary's eyes. The impact of Jesus' agony falls upon the woman who stands united with his redemptive sacrifice. For Mary it is her beloved son who is abandoned, not assisted. Everything that she would have done for him at that hour is denied her.

Francis' choice of the final phrase, *Dominum et magistrum*, 'Lord and Teacher', for the *Antiphon* emphasizes the fact that Mary has a relationship with the teaching authority of her son and his sovereignty. During his life she sees this authority and sovereignty despised. Mary is presented as a faithful witness to the authority of Jesus. Human contempt for that authority is one of the frequent abuses suffered by Jesus in Francis' passion psalms and it is witnessed by his mother. The opposition between Mary as a true witness to Jesus and his rejection by the world is a tragic theme of the composition. In psalm five, the psalm that I am about consider, Mary is a witness to the mockery and taunts that Jesus receives when he

is on the cross, ridicule which is loaded with derision for his authority. It is clear in psalm five that Mary cannot actively intervene to help her son, but we know from verse eight that the suffering man thinks of her. The derision is intended to undermine the authority and sovereignty in which she has placed her faith. The phrase 'Lord and Teacher', notably, comes from the Last Supper (John 13:12–15) and places the teaching authority of Jesus in a context of service, an unconditional service which illuminates his approach to death. Even when he is mocked on the cross as a failed teacher he is still serving us, still teaching us how to serve.

The Antiphon and Psalm Five in the Sequence: The Suffering of Jesus

Psalm five in the sequence is the psalm that is said at Sext and corresponds to Jesus being nailed to the cross and left there to die.

1. I cried to the Lord with all my voice, with all my voice I begged the Lord.
2. I pour out my prayer in the sight of God and I tell the Lord of all my trouble.
3. When my spirit failed me, you knew my ways.
4. On this way on which I walked, the proud hid a trap for me.
5. I looked to my right and I sought, and there was no one who knew me.
6. I had no means of escape and there is no one who cares about my life.
7. I have borne insults because of you; dishonour has covered my face.
8. I have become an outcast to my brothers, and a stranger to the children of my mother.
9. Holy Father, zeal for your house has consumed me; and the taunts of those who blasphemed you have fallen upon me.
10. They rejoiced and united together against me; many scourges were heaped upon me and I knew not why.
11. More numerous than the hairs of my head are those who hated me without cause.
12. My enemies, who persecuted me unjustly, have been strengthened; then I repaid what I did not steal.
13. Wicked witnesses, rising up, asked me things I did not know.

14. They repaid me evil for good and they slandered me because I pursued goodness.
15. You are my most holy Father, my King and my God.
16. Come to my help, Lord, God of my salvation.⁷

The first six verses are the opening verses of Psalm 141. Francis recited this psalm as he was dying,⁸ an indication of his desire to be united with the experience of Jesus. In verse eight the psalm reminds us that Mary is a witness to this scene. The psalm tells us in detail what Jesus feels and what he goes through. In verses one and two he cries out, in three he is spent, in verse four trapped, in verses five and six abandoned.

Verse eight emphasizes Jesus' estrangement from his family. There is a scriptural basis for this expressed in his relatives' evident scepticism about his mission.⁹ As a devout Catholic, Francis must have intended the term 'children of my mother' to be interpreted in the sense of Jesus' cousins, relatives or those who ought to have received him. In the broadest sense this includes all of us, the human race that Mary loves and into which she has brought Jesus through her obedience. The crucified man experiences his membership of the human race in the context of this isolation. He is separated from his own relatives. His mother is associated with this place of loneliness.

This psalm places an emphasis on the verbal torture of Jesus through the content of his teaching, in contrast with Mary's reverence for her son's teaching authority and her fidelity to its divine source, as asserted in the *Antiphon*. This reminds us that Mary cannot protect Jesus from suffering. The insults endured for God in verses seven and nine recall the Son's relationship with the Father. In verse nine Jesus suffers on account of the mockers' response to his zealous teaching and consuming commitment to God. Jesus speaks directly to God as 'you', indicating the deep personal content of what is being mocked. He thinks in verse nine about the holiness of God. The truth about God is on his mind and it is this for which he is dying. But while he is in pain he can hear blasphemy. Those who have themselves blasphemed the truth of God have falsely convicted

⁷ The translation is taken from Dominique Gagnan's article 'The Office of the Passion', *Greyfriars Review*, 7/1 (1993), 29–33.

⁸ See *The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano*, 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, 2000), 277.

⁹ Mark 3: 20–21 and John 7: 5.

him of the crime of blasphemy. The psalm emphasizes the misuse of human language to convict and abuse Jesus, for example in verses thirteen and fourteen. In contrast his mother is reduced to silence.

Verse ten, with its 'why', makes clear that a part of the suffering of Jesus is that it is incomprehensible. We know that, in fact, Jesus did ask God 'why?' from the cross (Mark 15:34). It is convincing, therefore, that when he was on the cross his mind went over the paradoxes of his situation and that the detail of each betrayal was present to him in a way suggested by the verses of Francis' psalm. The faith content of Jesus' words to God from the cross (Luke 23:46) is implicitly there in Francis' psalm as well, in the prayer to God as Father, King and Saviour in verses fifteen and sixteen. Francis portrays the mind of a man struggling with the treacherous sequence of events that has brought him down. This is what any human being would do.

Francis shows Jesus as humanly overwhelmed and confounded by what is happening to him, reminding us that on the cross he did not have a set of easy answers. The psalm poses a succession of unanswerable questions, paradoxical statements and contradictions. In verses four, five and six the dying man says that he has been trapped, rejected, abandoned, has had no access to escape. He has confronted evil witnesses in a mockery of a trial in verse thirteen, and in fourteen recalls that he has been surrounded by false testimony. He has been hated for no reason (verses ten and eleven), and been made to pay for that which he did not steal (verse twelve)—this could well mean his own authority from God.

The psalm reviews what has happened to Jesus, but the review reveals no answers, only horror and the intensity of the hatred directed against him. Francis evokes memories of ordeals, betrayals and schemes. It is very realistic that Jesus should be haunted by the sequence of lies and snares, by each of the cruel manoeuvres that have brought him to this death, by the personal nature of all this viciousness, including that of his own brothers, or those bound to him by ties of loyalty. And the *Antiphon*, together with verse eight, reminds us that all of his suffering is present to his mother.

The Suffering of Mary

Francis had obviously mediated on what is known from the Gospels and from tradition about Mary's presence at Jesus' death. Mary's presence at the foot of the cross, implied by both psalm and *Antiphon*, is a silent testimony to her son's authority. Jesus is consumed by zeal for his Father

and has been punished for his loyalty to Him. Mary is described as handmaid of the Father, and out of this obedience she supports the primacy that her son gives to his Father. In verses seven and nine, Jesus is described as punished for being a witness to the Father. Yet Mary knows with the certainty of her own revelation from the angel as a young girl that he came to her from God. Her faith in him has kept pace with his self-revelation.

We know that when Jesus was a child she pondered his words and actions in her heart. She has eagerly grasped what he said about himself to enlighten her own struggling intellect (Luke 2:51). We can imagine how she contemplated his teaching from his public ministry, as it was slowly conveyed to her, embracing his self-revelation with her total love and faith. And she has come to see that his testimony about God and himself is manipulated and used against him. His vulnerability as a man has been made possible by her own cooperation with God at the Annunciation. And she must witness this. Human beings cannot disturb Mary's relationship with the truth but they can punish her where she is most open, in her love for the son whom she has carried. The psalm makes clear that she sees him isolated as he is dying.

Mary's loyalty to her son is stressed by her *Antiphon*. Her power of intercession on our behalf is merciful; it is for those who have done this to him. When we ask her to pray for us in the *Antiphon*, her power of intercession derives from this hour, recalling Jesus' command from the cross (John 19:26–27). All of the great tributes in the *Antiphon*, the titles of mother, virgin, daughter and handmaid, spouse of the Holy Spirit and intercessor, arrive at their fulfilment at this moment.

Mary's constancy is tested in a manner comparable to the testing of Jesus' love for the Father. The anguish of each of his complaints is present to her. In addition to this being a psalm about psychological torment, its verses suggest the sounds of the crucifixion. Mary can hear the cries of her son. She can hear the sneers and taunts of those who unite against him. The mother who cared for her child sees him abandoned. The loyal handmaid of God sees and hears her son's teaching authority derided, as she stands there as a witness to that authority. As the true witness to him she hears him abused by evil witnesses. In the *Antiphon* we ask her to pray for us as a community, this woman who has seen a community rise up, in verses ten, eleven and thirteen, against her son.

The *Antiphon* in the *Office of the Passion* reminds us of the unique role of Mary in the life of Jesus. Mary stands symbolically at the periphery

of the *Office*, just as she was prepared to occupy a place on the margins of her son's life while he preached and healed, just as she obeyed the limits placed on her at his death. Although her interior sufferings are not described in the *Office of the Passion*, we are clearly meant to understand that the experience of her heart reflects, echoes and is united to the experience of her son. The relationship between psalm and *Antiphon* indicates that the events happening to Jesus happen before Mary's eyes and penetrate her heart. To witness the suffering of someone we love is unbearable. The onlooker is aware of everything that is happening, but can offer no protection, can do nothing. Francis, by arranging his *Antiphon* in close relation to his sequence of passion psalms surely intends to evoke Mary's pain in the silent, pregnant space between *Antiphon* and psalms. Her sinless presence and her intercession on our behalf bear witness to the salvific value of what occurs on Calvary. Arguably, her pain is the more powerfully expressed for being passed over in silence, just as Mary was in fact passed over and ignored by the soldiers.

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