

## *In the Trenches*

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Simplicity, simple living, slowing down, downsizing, whatever catchword you choose to call it, getting away from the treadmill of daily life seems to be the latest trend of this century. The third millennium is rapidly approaching and the people of the western world want to be ready. We do not want to be racing around picking up the dry cleaning, dropping the kids off at daycare, squeezing in a standing lunch on the run, or commuting in heavy traffic when the big 2000 rolls around.

We want a simpler life. We want a quieter life. We want a life in which we can stop and plant a few flowers instead of buying silk ones or paying someone else to plant them. We want to work a fair number of hours for a fair wage and to give our children the same opportunities we had, to have our voices heard in government, to be able to bank at an institution we trust, to have time to pray with our families, plan our meals, get a little exercise, and maybe have a little time left over to play a few hands of pinochle with some friends or enjoy a beer on the front porch on a Saturday afternoon.

We, especially, the followers of the simplest of leaders, long for this peaceful kingdom where we can pace our lives according to the hours of the day and the seasons of the year. I would guess that if you have time to read this it is probably stolen time, and somewhere in your psyche you are feeling anxious about other things you should be doing. I just hope you are not trying to read this while driving or operating heavy machinery!

Just what are we supposed to do about this problem? I ask myself this often enough, and no answer comes. While preparing to write this piece, I spent quite a bit of time trying to come up with some sage advice or pithy recommendations. Failing this, I turned my thoughts to Jesus, where they belong anyway, and to Francis whose example I profess to follow.

Jesus' life was simple enough. He somehow got to be thirty years old in relatively good health, with friends close enough to invite him to a wedding. Scripture gives us a glimpse at a good relationship with his mother, and enough personal charisma to attract a few people who would listen to him preach. As he continued to practice his vocation, he obviously improved at it, because the crowds became huge and his close friends became increasingly committed to him. Even at the end of his public life, his task was simple and straightforward. Speak the truth, get arrested, submit to torture, carry a big heavy cross in one direction uphill, allow strong men to drive nails into your arms and hang on this big cross until you die. Amen.

Francis' life after his conversion was not much more complex. Once he found his calling it was simple. Strip naked in public, cast off your relationship with your father, break your mother's heart, go live in the mud and rain barefoot and starving, sing because this makes you happy and allow people to scorn you and slander you until you eventually gain some credibility and a few friends to help you carry the load. Simple, really. Neither Jesus nor Francis had to worry about retirement, car payments, a mortgage or college tuition. They never had to take a vacuum for repair on their lunch hour or get three kids to three different places at once. They never had their cholesterol checked, had to squeeze a large potbelly into

last year's bathing suit or program a VCR. Once in awhile they ate out but always in non-smoking and never had to juggle hot coffee in a paper cup while going through a tollbooth. They were single men who died young, walked everywhere and had no place to live. Very simple, really.

Why do we have so much trouble with this? Is it the speaking the truth part we struggle with, or the going barefoot? Perhaps it's the torture or the family we may have to hurt. Or the insecurity of homelessness or the prospect of an early painful death that puts us off.

Maybe just maybe we have misjudged the lives of our Lord Jesus and friend Francis. These lives were indeed simple. What they were not was easy. Isn't this where we really get stuck? Could we not replace the word simple with the word easy when we are rolling our eyes heavenward beseeching God to lighten up?

We long to do the will of God in our lives. We pray for Jesus to show us the way. And we mean it. We are dreamers, most of us. We have had glimpses of the kingdom of heaven and we would like to get a better peek. It just seems so hard in this world so full of noisy violence, demands on our time and enervating running around. It seems so frustrating to grind away at meaningless paperwork and mindless repetition, forms and requirements, bogus rules and laws designed to trap us on the wrong side of the street or send us to jail for acts of kindness such as putting a coin in someone else's parking meter. But are our laws so much different from the laws of Jesus time? Are we really more challenged than a people whose religious leaders made one set of oppressive laws and whose government constantly flexed its muscles by imposing stupid meaningless laws of its own?

What about in Francis' time? Little city states, picking at each other over petty interpretations of laws and customs, warring and taking hostages, tearing up families and destroying property. Sounds a bit like Anycity, USA. We often romanticize the little walled town of Assisi with its narrow stone streets and pink buildings nestled into the great Mount Subasio. But those streets are steep and I imagine when it rains they can be mighty slippery. Francis spent his adulthood in the streets of Assisi, in the gutters filled with wastewater, in the alleys covered with pigeon droppings ducking garbage and verbal assaults as he went begging for food for the poor. He did not take his dream out of town, leaving his old home for a new start on the coast, away from his dysfunctional family. He had to pass his father's house often and probably saw his grieving mother in the marketplace, or in church. He did not take his suffering somewhere where it might be appreciated, rather he added to the difficulty of his life by staying where he would have to deal with the consequences of his choice every time he encountered a neighbor or relative. Is this what we envision as simplicity?

I know what I want. I want more time. I want more control over my finances. I want more freedom to use my talents at work. I want a less frenzied schedule, better digestion, a more organized kitchen and garage and someplace shady where I can read the Sunday paper. Heck, I'd like to read the Sunday paper before Thursday. But this life, if I'm serious about being a Christian and a Franciscan, isn't about what I want. My real desire is to

spend my time in the heart of God; burning with His love and spreading this love everywhere I go. Now, that's really simple!

Well, actually it is. This desire is truly simple in many ways. First of all, it can be fulfilled no matter what I do for a living. I can also pursue it anytime of the day, waking or sleeping. I can live it out alone or in company, whether I am well or ill, even if I am near death.

I think this is really the secret of Jesus' and Francis' success. They loved so deeply and were so consumed by this love for God and all creation that nothing else mattered. Their lives, so filled with suffering and pain were ultimately perfect in their simplicity. But their lives by the standards set by our culture were anything but simple. So once again we face a choice. We know that if we follow our heart's desire we will be simple, but we will also be little and poor and vulnerable, just as Jesus and Francis were. But to follow the world's way to simplification, we will need every convenience, an easier job with more pay, more time, more things and much more control over our lives. One path leads us peacefully into the fray to make our way up the mountain barefoot and humble. The other only piles on more burdens to drag with us, slowing us down and encumbering us in the end. It is the difference between singing and trying to hear music over the din of traffic, between embracing a dirty beggar and trying to find someone in a crowd who will embrace us. Which is really simpler?