

Every year on October 4th, we celebrate the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the great stigmatist-mystic whom God raised up to reform His holy Church and passed to his eternal reward in 1226. In his honor, I would like to briefly examine the enormous influence that St. Francis and his religious order of Friars Minor had in liturgical matters, particularly of the Roman Rite.

But first, a few preliminaries to demonstrate the devotion of St. Francis which he imparted to his Friars Minor, thereby becoming part of the spiritual charism of the Franciscan Order.

Care for Churches

One of the most famous incidents known by Catholics about the life of St. Francis concerns the Byzantine-style crucifix within the small ruined chapel of San Damiano. While praying there to determine his course of life, Christ spoke to Francis Bernardone, saying: “Francis, Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.”

Francis would initially take this divine directive literally and rebuild that chapel, as well as several others in the Assisi region. But his solicitude for the care of the House of God did not stop there. Francis was also renowned for carrying a broom with him during his travels—and to the chagrin of pastors—sweeping up dirty churches, cleaning the altars and the like.

And while St. Francis emulated Christ by personally adhering to Lady Poverty, he insisted that the best items be used in the sacred liturgy, particularly for the Blessed Sacrament, as his biographer, Thomas of Celano, relates in the chapter, “Of his devotion to the Lord’s Body”:

“At one time he determined to send brethren throughout the world with precious pyxes [i.e., ciboria] in order that wheresoever they might observe the Price of our Redemption [i.e., the Eucharist] unmeetly kept, they might deposit it in the best place possible.”[\[1\]](#)

Reverence for the Blessed Sacrament

As evidenced by the citation above, St. Francis had a deep devotion to the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, which was faithfully transmitted and taken up by his own Franciscan Order as denoted by a few examples.

Firstly, there is the miracle performed by St. Clare of Assisi in 1240, who drove off the Saracens attacking her convent by showing them the Blessed Sacrament—not in a monstrance as commonly depicted today, but encased in a box (or pyx) of silver and ivory.[\[2\]](#)

Secondly, there is the account about the Seraphic Doctor of the Church, St. Bonaventure, who was commissioned by Pope Urban IV in 1261 to compose an Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi. His Dominican friend, St. Thomas Aquinas was likewise requested to do the same, and while the Angelic Doctor's version was read to the pope, St. Bonaventure—overwhelmed by the former's beautiful Office of Corpus Christi that we use today—destroyed his own immediately out of humility.

One can only surmise what a sublime mystical composition was lost through this selfless act, which ultimately was inspired by St. Bonaventure's pious and theological comprehension of the Real Presence, as his holy father himself once expressed:

“What wonderful majesty! What stupendous condescension! O sublime humility! That the Lord of the whole universe, God and the Son of God, should humble Himself like this under the form of a little bread, for our salvation.”

Thirdly, there is the example of the 17th century Spanish Franciscan, St. Paschal Baylon, whose immense devotion and miracles of the Blessed Sacrament caused him to be declared the patron of Eucharistic Congresses and Societies by Pope Leo XIII in 1897.

Fourthly, there is a type of reverence to the Blessed Sacrament that is unique among some Franciscans, which according to their tradition is ascribed to St. Francis himself. When coming before the Real Presence, the friars kneel and then bow so their heads touch the floor.[\[3\]](#)

What is historically interesting about this special act of adoration is that when St. Francis taught this practice to his friars in the early 13th century, genuflecting had yet to become the prescribed reverence given to the Body of Christ in the Latin Church. (Note to pious souls: Franciscans restrict this practice to within their own chapels, so a standard genuflection elsewhere is sufficient.)

Lastly, in addition to the Franciscan Order popularizing adoration of the Blessed Sacrament—that is, Exposition and Benediction—it was the Capuchins (a reformed branch of the Franciscan Order) that popularized the Forty Hours Prayer. This annual devotion

consists of exposing the Blessed Sacrament for adoration over a period of three days during which special Masses are offered before the Real Presence and two Eucharistic processions are made.

Contribution to the Uniformity of the Roman Rite

At the time of St. Francis—the Middle Ages—the offering of Mass and praying the Divine Office according to the Roman Rite was not as consistent as seen today and a wide variety of practices existed, not just from diocese to diocese, but even parish to parish.

This situation was not necessarily a problem for monastic or regular orders (e.g., Benedictines or Augustinians), which usually remained within the walls of their own religious houses and used their own liturgical books. However, it was a problem for the newly-formed mendicant orders that traveled to preach (and beg) from town to town, and so were required to conform themselves to the local practices wherever they went—one can just imagine the learning curve involved!

While the mendicant Dominicans would struggle to resolve this issue over the course of many years (initially deciding to merely adopt the local liturgical practices),[\[4\]](#) however, St. Francis ordered his friars in 1221 via the Franciscan Rule to follow the Roman books as used in Rome itself for the offering of Mass and praying of the Divine Office—a decision that would have far-reaching consequences for the entire Latin Church.

A great deal of controversy exists among liturgical historians as to which Roman version was initially adopted by the fledgling Franciscan Order, whether of the papal court or one of the basilicas such as St. Peter's versus that of St. John Lateran's, etc.[\[5\]](#) However, in our context, the most important aspect of this historical debate is that St. Francis saw the importance of securing liturgical uniformity within his brotherhood of Friars Minor.

Certainly, part of St. Francis' desire to use the liturgical books of Rome was motivated by a strong devotion to the Roman Pontiff, and thereby the inclination to imitate how the Vicar of Christ offered Mass and prayed the Divine Office. But a practical impetus was to ensure consistency among his friars, who as mendicants, were not only continually traveling from place to place, but regrouping from time to time. Thus, for example, the importance that the friars were all using the same breviary, so they could always pray as a single community.

In fact, the popularization of the breviary itself was a direct result of the mendicant orders, who could not rely on the usual large (and very heavy) choir books used by monastic orders (and which practically never left their stalls).

While many attempts had been made before to introduce some uniformity within the Roman Rite, it is largely due to the influence of St. Francis of Assisi and his Franciscan Order that this eventually became a culminative reality with the codification of the *Missale Romanum* in 1570 per the papal bull *Quo Primum* of St. Pius V. And as the Franciscan Order continued to flourish and evangelize the four corners of the world, it did so with the Roman Missal.

It is noteworthy to mention that the Franciscan Order has its own versions of the liturgical books of the Roman Rite (e.g., the missal, breviary and ritual), for example, the *Missale Romanum Seraphicum*. However, these only differ from the standard Roman books in that they feature the specific propers (or prayers) for the Franciscan saints as well as their own feasts (e.g., August 2, the Feast of the Portiuncula Privilege), and other minor details (such as certain ceremonial customs).

Franciscan Influence on the Development of the Roman Missal

In touching upon the standardization and codification of the *Missale Romanum*, the Franciscans were also instrumental in the formation of several practices during Mass that we take for granted today.

As we have noted previously, St. Francis of Assisi had an immense devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, particularly in how Christ condescends to change the substance of bread and wine into His actual Body and Blood for us to partake for our salvation.

The Seraphic Father held the same pious attitude toward Our Lord's humility in taking on our flesh and becoming man for our Redemption. This led, in turn, to the miracle of the Nativity scene at Greccio in 1223 and the Franciscan Order's popularization of the already-existing Roman *praesepe* custom in preparation for Christmas.[\[6\]](#)

In connection with this devotion to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, as copiers of altar missals, the Franciscans are credited with having introduced the rubric of the celebrant genuflecting during the *Credo* at the word "*Et incarnatus est...*", which eventually became the common practice in the Roman Mass.

Similarly, while the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John was popularly used on many religious occasions (even baptisms), it was originally said by the celebrant as a private devotion, either at the altar, or while returning to the sacristy (which may still be done by the bishop at a Solemn Pontifical Mass). Again, it was the Franciscan missal copyists that began to insert this private devotion into the actual missal texts, which eventually was codified as an

official part of the Roman Mass (along with the genuflection at “*Et Verbum caro factum est*”), now known as the “Last Gospel”.

Perhaps the earliest Franciscan contribution to the Roman Missal, however, is the Sequence *Dies Irae*, chanted during the Requiem Mass. This chanted prose was composed by Thomas of Celano and is considered by some as the greatest poetic example of the medieval period.

Conclusion

Let us conclude this brief tribute to St. Francis of Assisi and his Order of Friars Minor by citing the Collect of his Mass:

“O God, Who, through the merits of blessed Francis, didst give increase to Thy Church by enriching her with new offspring: grant us that, following his example, we may despise earthly goods and ever be glad to partake of Thy heavenly gifts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, who liveth and reigneth with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, one God, forever and ever. Amen.”

Notes

[1] Taken from [*The Lives of S. Francis of Assisi*](#) by Brother Thomas of Celano (trans. A.G. Ferrers Howell), E.P. Dutton, 1908.

[2] Cf. Brother Thomas of Celano, [*The Life of Saint Clare*](#) (trans. Fr. Paschal Robinson), Dolphin Press, 1910.

[3] In relation to this Franciscan reverence, there is a humorous story about Fr. Solanus Casey, who died in Detroit, Michigan in 1957. As a porter, he would often have pieces of candy in the upper pocket of his habit for his younger visitors. So, when coming into chapel and making his obeisance, the candies would fall out and noisily spill onto the floor, thereby disturbing the friars at prayer in the stalls! Fr. Solanus’ devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was also famous among his fellow friars. He would frequently spend whole nights praying before the tabernacle and often be found at Matins asleep on the altar steps.

[4] For more on this topic, see Fr. William Bonniwell, O.P., [*The History of the Dominican Liturgy 1215-1945*](#) (Wagner, 1945).

[5] This fascinating topic has been comprehensively addressed in *The Origins of the Modern*

Roman Liturgy: The Liturgy of the Papal Court and the Franciscans in the Thirteenth Century by S.J.P. Van Dijk and J. Hazelden Walker (The Newman Press, 1959). An online edition of this incredible resource is available to those who have an account at [HeinOnline](#).

[6] Cf. Louis Tofari, "[From Holy Crib to Manger Scene](#)".