

LEARNING
THE
GOOD LIFE

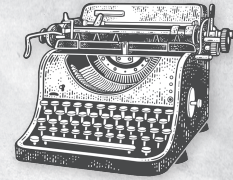
Wisdom from the Great Hearts
and Minds That Came Before

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CHAPTER 30

Anonymous



Introduction to “The Peace Prayer of Saint Francis”

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Despite what its name suggests, there is no evidence that the prayer below was written by Francis of Assisi. It was most likely a product of the early twentieth century, since its wording has been traced to a small devotional Catholic magazine in France in 1912. The explosion of the two world wars fueled the prayer’s popularity among Catholics, especially after the Vatican’s official newspaper published a version in January 1916. It then spread among other Christians and even non-Christians. As Augustine Thompson points out in the introduction of his biography of Francis of Assisi, Francis “would not have written such a piece, focused as it is on the self, with its constant repetition of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me,’ the words ‘God’ and ‘Jesus’ never appearing once.”¹

Fair enough. But it is fair, too, to note that few if any people have complained loudly about the misattribution. Could it be because Francis’s well-known love for nature and animals is not far removed from the desire for societal peace expressed in the prayer? Or could it be that the simple prayer reflects his simplicity in the popular imagination? Whatever the explanation for the peace prayer’s association with Francis, its popularity suggests that Francis might be a man for all Christian seasons and epochs.

The words “peace” and “eternal life” bookend the popular prayer from Francis of Assisi you’re about to read. The implication is that they are one and the same, that peace on earth would lead to life with God in the afterlife. More significant is the desire of the Christian supplicant to become an “instrument” of peace. Both verses carry the assumption that Christians encounter and even generate hatred, injury, doubt, despair, darkness, and sadness during their earthly journeys. The prayer admits, too, that they naturally desire consolation, understanding, love, forgiveness, and life from others in their society.

The peace prayer upturns and reverses this paradigm. Forcefully and rhythmically, it calls for activism in society—though not political activism, which involves organization among the like-minded and, likely, confrontation and

1. Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), ix.

opposition to the different-minded. The call of this prayer is broader than politics. It calls for conducting one's life according to the Gospels and in kindness towards others. It is an aspirational prayer since the supplicant asks to be a better Christian by living Christian values antithetical to many harsh realities in society.

It is to this ideal and desire that the repetition of “grant that I may not so much seek to be _____ as to _____” of the second verse proves appealing and powerful. It juxtaposes the passive tense and the active one, confirming the call to follow Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. This verse also names a hierarchy of sorts about human needs: the needs for consolation then understanding then love. It concludes with an affirmation about the paradoxes of being a Christian, showing two sides of the same coin: giving and receiving, death and eternal life, and forgiveness that goes both ways. The prayer not only lists the most important values; it also empowers the supplicant to pursue them actively and purposefully.

The Peace Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console,
 to be understood as to understand,
 to be loved as to love.
 For it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Think of the word *injury* in the context of this prayer, and then name at least three kinds of *injury* in society. What are they, and what are their effects?

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2. How could Christians “receive” when they give, as the prayer suggests? And what do they receive?
3. The words “love” and “pardon” (and related forms) appear more than other nouns or verbs in this prayer. What is the relationship between love and pardon?
4. Do you feel empowered by this prayer as you read it out loud? If yes, how? If no, why not?