When Kenneth Clark devoted an episode to the Middle Ages in his magisterial BBC series, *Civilisation*, he celebrated the chivalry, courtesy, and romance of the French and Burgundian courts—the Gothic world of “imaginative fancy” that coexisted with a “sharp sense of reality.” Clark no doubt surprised his viewers by then veering off in a different direction, with an encomium to a chivalric figure of a quite different sort, the spiritual knight errant who, by the time of his death, had captured the imagination of much of Europe: St. Francis of Assisi.

He was a man of sanctity, but there were others before him. What made St. Francis so influential was his extraordinary originality: the son of a rich businessman who renounced his wealth and slept in pigstys while retaining the courtliness and gentility that were noble attributes of his era; the anti-establishment figure who founded a great religious institution; the man of radical poverty whose followers were not permitted (even if they had wanted) to imitate his utter rejection of worldly goods; the man of the Bible who never owned a complete one; the author of the first great literary work in Italian dialect, the “Canticle of the Sun,” who was steeped in the jongleur tradition of French poetry and song; the naïf who moved the heart and enriched the religious imagination of that great realist and exponent of papal power, Innocent III; the child of the age of Crusades who sought not the conquest of the Muslims but their conversion. And so forth and so on: almost, if not quite, *per omnia saecula saeculorum*.

His enduring magnetism, which is bound up with the paradoxes of his life, has led to many “false Francises.” Marxists claimed him as a medieval anticipation of their project. I suppose it was inevitable that, during the sixties, hippies found in Francis an anticipation of Haight-Ashbury and Woodstock, dropping out and turning on. Contemporary environmentalists transform Francis’s biblical piety about
God's creation into a prototype of their worship of a quite different god, Gaia. An immense body of scholarship on the life, thought, and impact of St. Francis ably refutes these distortions. But now comes the first pope to take as his regnal title the name of one of Catholicism’s most popular saints, and the reinvention of Francesco Bernardone has started all over again—this time, in the form of projecting onto St. Francis what observers admire in his papal namesake.

Francis-reinventing is unfortunate, for the real St. Francis has much to teach the Catholic Church today. And perhaps the first and foremost lesson to be learned from him is how to be truly men and women of the Church. For, notwithstanding his originality and, by some lights, eccentricity, Francesco Bernardone was always and profoundly an obedient (if not always docile) son of the Catholic Church.

His deep ecclesial sensibility, so at odds with the autonomy project that warps both Church and culture today, is nicely captured in an incident from his life. It seems that the Poverello, the “little poor one,” was traveling in Lombardy and stopped in a church to pray. A local Manichean—Italy really was full of strange and wondrous characters in those days—wanted to use Francis to draw the local villagers to his sect. The local pastor was living with a concubine, and the Manichean, seeking to exploit the scandal, asked Francis, “If the priest maintains a concubine and stains his hands, must one put faith in his teaching and respect the sacraments he administers?” Francis, understanding the game being played, went down on his knees before the wayward priest and the local people, and replied:

I do not know if these hands are really stained as the other claims. What I do know, in any case, is that, even if they were, that would not in any way diminish the power and efficacy of the sacraments of God. These hands remain the channel through which the grace and benefits of God stream toward the people. That is why I kiss them, out of respect for the one who delegated his authority to them.

Francis knew, and we should know, that God took a risk on the Church. That risk was to put the means and instruments of beatitude and salvation into human hands—which is to say, into the hands of sinners.
who would inevitably make a mess of things from time to time. But as Francis understood the economy of salvation and the radical obedience to which the disciples of the Lord Jesus are called, if God saw fit to take a risk on the humanity of the Church, who are we to deem that a mistake? At the same time, Francis was a genuine reformer who called the comfortable religious professionals of his time to a life beyond clericalism and privilege. Rather than staying becalmed in the sacristy, the sanctuary, and the presbytery, the clergy of his day, he urged, should lead a demanding, Gospel-centered life of proclaiming the Word and celebrating the sacraments, nourishing their people with the tangible realities God had entrusted to human hands as pathways to the Trinity: the Bible and the Eucharist.

St. Francis’s churchmanship, if we may call it that, was closely related to his radically incarnational religious imagination, which is his second important legacy to our times, beset as we are by new forms of Gnosticism. That Francis and his first companions made a fuss over the restoration of abandoned churches and the cleaning of ill-kept churches was not simply because the Poverello had dreams in which he was told to rebuild churches; those dreams and that work had a deeper meaning. Rebuilding fallen walls, sweeping dirty church floors, and cleaning ill-kept sacred vessels were expressions, however simple, of the profoundly incarnational conviction that animated Francis’s life and mission. It was the conviction that, because of the Incarnation, what lies between the ordinary and the extraordinary is not a border, and still less a wall, but rather a membrane, across which spiritual nutrients flow in abundance. The Incarnate Word conscripts the tangibilities of ecclesial life, and even creation itself, to draw us into the divine life.

In our Gnostic culture, which devalues the givenness of things and the revelatory power built into that givenness, this Franciscan reminder to twenty-first-century Christians is of crucial importance. It is through material things—water, salt, and oil; bread and wine; marital love—that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ comes to the people the Son has made his own. This radical incarnationalism has considerable pastoral and apologetic implications. If two millennia of argument have not finished off Gnosticism, that most protean of heresies, it seems unlikely that contemporary arguments, no matter how persuasive orthodox believers may find them, will do the job with the unconverted, the skeptical, or the hostile. Thus the “incarnational” counter to contemporary Gnosticism and its ideology of “you are what you say you are” (irrespective, for example, of biology) will be less an argument than a demonstration:
living in concord with the moral truths built into the world and into us, which lead to beatitude or happiness.

Arguments are important and Christians should keep making them. But in a postmodern world that can only concede “your truth” and “my truth” (before it tries to deploy coercive state power to impose its truth on everyone), it will be the witness of Christian lives that changes hearts and minds. This is especially true when Christians live nobly, courageously, and compassionately in service to those who have been most deeply wounded by the Gnostic cultural tsunami and its personally lethal effects. The days when an Evelyn Waugh could think his way into Catholicism with the help of a skilled Jesuit dialectician like Fr. Martin D’Arcy are over; our culture is too intellectually shattered for that to be the evangelical paradigm. The new paradigm must be in the Franciscan mode, with embodied witness coming first. Because of that witness, those who have been touched by Christian compassion or Christian nobility or Christian courage may be moved to ask, “How can you live this way?” And at this point, the door to the offer of friendship with Christ has been opened.

This incarnationalism leads, in turn, to the third Franciscan lesson for our time: Christian witness must be based on the experience of being saved by the radical self-emptying of Jesus Christ, who is Savior, not just moral exemplar. Francis, whose entire religious life sprang from a profound consciousness of having been saved, reminds us that salvation is at the heart of the Christian proclamation. Christianity is not about me; nor is it about feeling good about me. It’s about salvation—rescue from all the self-induced afflictions to which humanity is prone; forgiveness when those afflictions overcome us; ultimately, life within the embrace of the Thrice-Holy God. A Franciscan renewal of twenty-first-century Catholicism will, of course, emphasize the works of charity and mercy as the entry point for evangelization, as I have just suggested. But that does not and cannot make the Church into another non-governmental organization in the good-works business. The Church is about salvation or it is a fraud—a soup kitchen with smells and bells.

Francis, whose asceticism was exceptionally severe, could be a man of overflowing joy because he lived his adult life in the confidence that his salvation came not through his own merits, but from the superabundance of divine love manifest in Jesus Christ. That conviction was born from a profound
spiritual experience that touched his heart and mind, his emotions as well as his intellect, so he wanted others to have a similar experience. Hence the crèche and its tender evocation of Christ’s birth and infancy. Hence the evocative poetry, so redolent of a medieval troubadour celebrating his lady, which for Francis was Lady Poverty. And hence, ultimately, the stigmata. The God-given dignity squandered in the Garden of Eden had been restored at Easter to men and women who could now be, again, sons and daughters of the Most High God, and thus truly themselves; yet the path to Easter, Francis knew, went up the rocky hill of Calvary.

Here we have the Poverello at his most Pauline and Trinitarian. It is in the kenosis, the self-emptying, of the Son that the Father effects salvation in the power of the Spirit. In that sense, Francis of Assisi’s life as a mendicant embodied in evangelical witness the truth of the Christological hymn in Philippians and its celebration of “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–8).

This experience of being saved by the love of God made manifest in Christ was made tangibly present for St. Francis in two privileged ways: in the Eucharist and in the Bible.

The Eucharist, the Poverello believed and taught, was the royal road to the Father. By receiving the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, we become members of the Son, who alone reveals the Father of mercies. The Eucharist is the most tangible way in which the people of the Church become divinized. Thus the Eucharist must never be reduced to a matter of weekly or daily routine; the Eucharist, experienced as St. Francis experienced it, should always be an occasion to be surprised by joy. Here, Francis anticipated the Second Vatican Council’s teaching that the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy is the source and summit of the Church’s life, and of every individual Christian’s life.

Francis’s love of the Bible as a way to receive the medicine of salvation was another anticipation of Vatican II and its restoration of the Scriptures to a central role in Catholic life; and here, too, is a Franciscan lesson for the Church of the twenty-first century.
To see the world through the world’s eyes is to see things in a distorted way. Original sin, we may say, was the original astigmatism, and in our time the *Kultursmog* of Gnosticism further distorts our perceptions of the human person and the human condition. But whatever the peculiarities of our moment, the problem of seeing things aright is a perennial one. That is what the Bible, read openly and, if you will, with Franciscan innocence, helps us to do. To see biblically is to see the world aright. Or, to vary the imagery, the Bible turns the world upside down so that the world comes into clearer focus.

The Christmas story, so familiar to us and so dear to Francis, is the beginning of this pattern of vision correction through inversion: the Son of the Most High God, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. That pattern continues through the gospels. Jesus doesn’t evangelize the principalities and powers (although they, too, are welcome to listen and learn); he goes to the outcasts, including lepers and prostitutes, to announce and embody a kingdom in which Israel’s God is king not just of the people of Israel, but of the whole world. Moreover, the Jewish Messiah will not establish God’s rule and kingdom by political cunning, or by a display of worldly wisdom, or by knocking emperors and procurators off their thrones and judgment seats. He will reign from a different throne, an instrument of torture—the Cross. He will not be celebrated, like victorious Roman generals, with a triumphal spectacle conducted in the capital of a world empire. The signs of his triumph will be the pierced hands and feet of a transfigured, glorified body that defies time and space; burning memories of a walk to Emmaus; an empty tomb; a breakfast of grilled fish and bread on the lakeshore; a commission to go and convert the world, issued to a ragtag assortment of nobodies.

This biblical inversion of our ordinary perceptions and expectations, shaped as they are by the world’s priorities, cures our astigmatism. Daily encounter with the Bible, especially the gospels, allows us to see the world aright, as God sees it. To return again and again to the Scriptures takes us into the world of genuine happiness, which is the “inverted” world of the Beatitudes. Deep familiarity with the Bible enables us to penetrate the *Kultursmog* of the present and see things in the light of eternal reality and the divine gifts of creation and redemption.

Then there is the lesson for the twenty-first-century Church to be learned from St. Francis the layman. While most scholars believe that Francis was ordained to the diaconate, his way of living the gospel life
was a decidedly lay pattern of the imitation of Christ, ordered to evangelization. Here we find in Francis an anticipation of St. John Paul II’s threefold teaching on the New Evangelization. First, all Christians, whatever their state of life in the Church or the world, are called to be missionary disciples. Second, the measure of our discipleship is our evangelical effectiveness in offering to others the gift of friendship with Christ that we have been given. And, finally, there are countless apostolates in which lay men and women will be the primary agents of evangelization, because those fields—the world of work and business, the media, the arts and sciences, politics—are arenas that laypeople properly formed in the faith are far more likely to penetrate than those in Holy Orders or consecrated life.

St. Francis championed the Church’s sacramental life, but the drama of his imitation of Christ took place in the world, not within the Church’s sanctuary. His way of humility was available to all, whatever their state of life, which was why his example enflamed the spiritual imagination of the Middle Ages. And in this sense, he was the precursor of what Lumen Gentium, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, described as the “universal call to holiness.”

When I was a boy, I was given a book that I resurrected and reread a few years ago: The Thirteenth, Greatest of Centuries, by the now long-forgotten James J. Walsh. It’s an all-stops-pulled celebration of the Middle Ages as the summit of Christian civilization—a sentiment I find at least somewhat attractive, until I remind myself that it would require later centuries for us to acquire the blessings of anesthesia, modern dentistry, and single-barrel bourbon. Yet, even if we lack James J. Walsh’s unequivocal enthusiasm for medieval Christendom, H. Richard Niebuhr, in Christ and Culture, was surely right to say that the High Middle Ages witnessed the greatest synthesis of Christianity, culture, and society ever achieved. Nevertheless, the medieval synthesis was less than complete—the garment of the age was neither seamless nor unsullied.

Heresies proliferated during Francis’s time: Waldensians, Cathars, Arnoldists, Humiliati, Patarines, Manicheans. Some of these off-brand movements were deeply confused intellectually. Others were groping down false paths toward the reform of an institutional Church that, for all its integration with culture and society, was becoming evangelically flaccid and sluggish, perhaps in the complacent conviction (not unlike that of the recent past) that the faith could be transmitted by cultural osmosis, as a
kind of ethnic heritage. There were scandals of clerical corruption and simony. And there were other
problems, chief among them the fact that, as one scholar puts it, “outside the monasteries and cathedrals,
the religion lived and practiced by the faithful had been reduced to a collection of gestures and formulas,
especially since the liturgical language—Latin in the West—had become unintelligible to them, and the
priest was, above all, the man who knew and performed the efficacious rites.”

In this situation, the medieval Church’s most urgent challenge was mission: revitalizing the life of faith
among those who were lukewarm, sparking faith in unbelievers, and transmitting the faith to the next
generation. Francis sought to rekindle the evangelical fire in the Church by conceiving of Christian life
not as a withdrawal from the world, but as a pilgrimage in the world, a pilgrimage toward and for
conversion. The call to missionary discipleship was issued, Francis believed, to the whole Church, not
just to clergy. By his own example, which was very “in your face,” he jarred the Church of the thirteenth
century out of its institutional comfort zone. He thus inspired new modes of Christian community that
were essentially missionary in character, creating a new synthesis of the charismatic and institutional
elements that are always present in the life of the Church. This caused a good bit of uproar, as parallel
movements in our own time have done. But the uproar was contained, at least during Francis’s lifetime, by
his profoundly ecclesial sensibility and his evangelical obedience.

And that brings us to another Franciscan lesson for a Catholicism that will, with other Christian
communities, mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in the months ahead. Francis of Assisi was,
without doubt, a reformer, even a radical reformer who sought to revitalize the Church through a
reappropriation of its gospel roots. But he was a reformer with a difference. As we anticipate the
quincentenary of the events in Wittenberg in 1517, it’s good to remember the contrast between Francesco
Bernardone and Martin Luther drawn by Georges Bernanos:

One reforms the Church only by suffering for her; one reforms the visible Church only by suffering for
the invisible Church. One reforms the vices of the Church only by multiplying the example of its most
heroic virtues. It is possible that Francis of Assisi may not have been less disgusted than Luther by the
lasciviousness and simony of the prelates. It is even certain that he cruelly suffered from them, for his
nature was really different from that of the monk of Weimar. But he did not challenge iniquity; he did not
try to confront it. He threw himself into poverty; he devoted himself to it to the deepest extent possible, as into the source of all remissions, of all purity. Instead of stripping away from the Church unjustly acquired goods, he showered it with invisible treasures and, under the gentle hand of this beggar, the mound of gold and wealth began to flower like a bush in springtime.

A Franciscan, evangelical reform purifies the Church by returning to the eternal source of sanctity, Christ himself. That, in my judgment, is the reform for which Pope St. John XXIII hoped in summoning the Second Vatican Council. And as his biographer, I’m quite convinced that that is the kind of evangelical reform Pope St. John Paul II sought to bring about by giving that council its authoritative interpretation. St. Francis challenges us to put out into the deep of postmodernity, just as he challenged the complacent, “safe” Christianity of his own time. Catholicism today must leave the shallow and brackish waters of institutional maintenance, understanding that the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 is addressed to each of us in baptism, and living the universal call to holiness in such a way that the world meets Christ in us—and thus meets the truth about itself.

Over the past half century or so, too many parts of the Catholic world have come to think of “reform” as something we conjure up from our own cleverness, as if we must puzzle out what makes the Church “relevant.” Too often “reform” has been a matter of acquiescence, even surrender, to the spirit of the age. Perhaps Francis, who had a singular (and singularly intense) personality, experienced the temptation to think of reform, as some of our contemporaries do, in essentially Pelagian terms: as something we effect by our own efforts and our own lights. One might find at least a tiny echo of this inadequate notion of reform in his initial impulse to rebuild Christ’s Church by attending to ecclesiastical masonry—an episode in the early steps of his pilgrimage toward Christ that makes me think of present-day temptations to live the New Evangelization by getting top-drawer management consultants to advise the Church on messaging. But Francis came to see that renewal is always spiritual first, not institutional. He resisted the temptation to view things the other way around, and so should we.

All authentic reform in the Church recaptures and revitalizes the “form” that Christ gave the Church. That “form” is the Church’s constitution (in the British sense of that word), what an older generation called the deposit of faith. We do not judge the deposit of faith, the Christ-given foundation of the
Church; it stands in judgment on us and on our reforming efforts. And it is in retrieving lost elements of that constituting “form” and revitalizing them in our own time that we are true Catholic reformers. That was true of Vatican II’s authentic reforms in its teaching on the nature of the Church, the office of bishop, and religious freedom. Forgotten or misplaced elements of the Church’s Christ-bestowed constitution were retrieved and made the sources of Catholic renewal. That must be true of the ongoing work of reform in the Church today.

And this, I might add parenthetically, was the issue beneath the issues at the synods of 2014 and 2015: the obedience of the Church to divine revelation, in which we find the Church’s constitutive “form.” The reality and binding character of revelation were a principal theme of Vatican II, where the key passage is paragraphs seven and eight of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. To imagine that history, and especially ephemeral contemporary history, judges revelation is to put things precisely backwards. Doing so is what has cost mainline Protestantism its vitality. That is not a road that the Catholic Church should pursue; it is certainly not the road even so radical a reformer as Francis of Assisi would urge us to pursue.

Francis prayed that he might be given the gift of suffering as Christ had suffered, and his prayer was granted in the form of the stigmata—another Franciscan *novum* in the history of the Christian spiritual life, although it was anticipated in Paul’s confession to the Galatians that he bore on his body “the marks of Jesus” (Gal. 6:17). The cruciform participation in the suffering of Christ that Francis sought is now the lot of millions of Christians around the world, who are violently persecuted for no other reason than that they are Christians.

We owe them a debt of solidarity on which we dare not default. In addition to that, however, Catholics in the West today must understand that we are very likely heading into a season of persecution ourselves, a season of the cross less dire than that lived by those Christians presently under direct mortal threat, but quite real nevertheless. Our *Via Crucis* will not be as dramatic as that unfolding in ancient Mesopotamia. But it will be persecution, and it will extract costs: financial, social, professional, and, likely, legal.

There are good reasons to mount challenges to the increasingly aggressive intolerance and soft
totalitarianism of postmodern progressivism. We owe our neighbors our best efforts to prevent further diminishments of the common good. But we also need to adopt a Franciscan disposition toward the coming challenges. That means embracing persecution as more than the necessary cost of discipleship. Poverty was, for St. Francis, the blessing of beatitude, for it united him with Christ. Our cultural marginalization, even the manhandling of our religious freedom by cynical uses of the law to establish various orthodoxies of the sexual revolution, can be that kind of Christ-conforming poverty for us.

If it comes to that, can we enter into this impoverishment of the Church’s status and influence in the West with a Franciscan spirit, using our joyful embrace of Christ crucified and risen as an evangelical opportunity to offer a death-dealing culture a path beyond its lethal self-absorption and its confusion of the pleasure principle with beatitude? This distinctive, contemporary version of the marriage to Lady Poverty may well be the Franciscan task of the Church in the West at this historical moment. Embracing it, we may yet give the West a new birth of freedom, rightly understood.

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Franciscan Churchmanship. By Weigel, George.

Franciscans is the popular name of the priests and brothers of the Order of Friars Minor, founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209. In 1517 Pope Leo X divided the order into two autonomous branches, Observant Friars Minor and Conventual Friars Minor. A third branch, the Capuchin Friars Minor, begun in 1525, became autonomous in 1619. Within the ranks of the Observants, three stricter groups were formed in the sixteenth century: the Discalced or Alcantarine, the Reformati, and the Recollect Friars Minor.