What’s in the Name Francis?

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When we were watching the white smoke in 2013, we knew that we would first learn something about the direction of the new papacy as soon as we heard its new name announced. As the punning Latin proverb has it, *Nomen omen est*. Name is destiny. The name Benedict had perhaps augured an attempt to rebuild the intellectual foundations of Christendom. So what was in the name Francis? A look at Franciscan icons from classic Western letters is a long way round, but Fr. Jorge Bergoglio was a secondary school teacher of literature and would no doubt get a kick out of the ways in which his religious life has imitated art. To put this point in theological terms, as Moses and David were Old Testament types of Christ, these literary Franciscans prefigured Pope Francis.

SHAKESPEARE’S CUNNING FRANCISCANS

Like the present Holy Father, William Shakespeare channeled an inner Franciscan. Despite Elizabethan persecution
of Roman Catholics, he gave several roles to characters from an order that had virtually disappeared from England by his birth. Shakespeare took a political risk in overtly portraying them onstage, where the royal censor, the Master of the Revels, might well have objected, demanded their removal, and even prosecuted the playwright’s company. What reasons, dramaturgical, political, and religious, might have led Shakespeare to take such a risk to his livelihood and person? Do those reasons shed light on the rhetorical effect of the name Francis when Catholicism seeks to survive today against secular hostility?

Shakespeare’s most famous Franciscan character is Friar Lawrence in Romeo and Juliet. He appears in his cell at first light not praying lauds but ready to gather medicinal herbs like that great natural philosopher, the Franciscan Roger Bacon of Oxford. Filling up his “osier cage” with both “baleful weeds and precious-juicèd flowers,” he’s a proto-chemist musing on theological paradoxes:

O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies

In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities;

For naught so vile that on the earth doth live

But to the earth some special good doth give;

Nor aught so good but,

strained from that fair use,

Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse. (2.2.15-20)

In this short soliloquy, Friar Lawrence relates tragic paradox to divine power: grace so fills the world that evil can be brought out of good, yet good can also devolve into evil. This thesis is no idle scholastic disputation. It foreshadows the play's central thematic movement: sincere but imprudent love in a valid but clandestine marriage leads to premature death, from which springs reconciliation or "jointure" and "glooming peace" (5.3.298, 306) between the Montagues and Capulets.

The good friar allows the ambiguity in appearances to save the essences and graces of dogma. He points gently but clearly to the supernatural end when he agrees to marry Romeo and Juliet secretly:

For this alliance may so happy prove

To turn your households' rancor to pure love. (2.3.91-92)

While he avoids a head-on collision with the divisive culture, he holds that that Holy Matrimony is the salvation of society. In fact, he is ultra-orthodox in seeing marriage as a solution to concupiscence. Despite the grace that gives medicine pharmacological "power," "poison hath residence" (2.3.24), he maintains, in man's fallen nature:

Two such opposèd kings encamp them still

In man as well as herbs—grace andrude will;

And where the worser is predominant,

Full soon the canker death eats up that plant. (2.3.27-30)

He is the loyal spiritual adviser of two rash young lovers. His well-meaning ministrations are ruined by fate but trumped by Providence. At the play's end, Capulet offers a hand in forgiveness, and Montague promises a golden statue in honor of "true and faithful Juliet": the children have become "poor sacrifices of [their] enmity." (5.3.305) The faithful follower of "holy St. Francis" (2.3.65), always "known for a holy man" by the Prince despite his interference, offers himself up to "let [his] old life/Be sacrificed some hour before his time/Unto the rigor of severest law" (5.3.268-270). Friar Lawrence is the strict guardian of reckless virtue in preparing the marriage sacrament:

For, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone

Till holy church incorporates two in one (2.5.36-37)

He distinguishes between "doting" (2.3.82) and "pure love" as Romeo's "assistant" (2.3.90). Shortly before he performs their valid if illicit marriage, he gives sage counsel:

Therefore love

moderately: long love doth so;

Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow. (2.5.14-15)

In fact, in a play characterized by passive reaction to sudden, arbitrary movements of fate (infatuation, family animosities, youthful aggression), ultimate prudence unties his knots. While he occasionally bumbles, he manages to overcome passionate recklessness and irrational hatred, a hatred that may be a transposition of the religious animosity between Catholics and Protestants in England at the time, for Montague is no less than the name of a great English Catholic family on the maternal side of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. His equivocation aims at the care of souls from a broken community in need of a field hospital: better to shrive and wive quickly and secretly than to perpetuate

an occasion of sin.

Thus, far from trafficking in superstition and wantonness like the friar in Shakespeare's source (or like the wicked friars of Protestant contemporaries Marlowe and Spencer), Friar Lawrence maneuvers as an underground minister of grace in the labyrinthine catacombs beneath Protestant oppression. He celebrates "evening mass" (4.1.37), forbidden by Trent, but still popular and perhaps an allusion to secret Catholic masses in Elizabethan Catholic estates. His soporific vial bears not alchemical magic but perhaps actual graces, those mysterious nudges of the divine toward the good. Aimed at thwarting bigamy or suicide, the vial indeed accidentally brings death but finally a kind of resurrection, newness of life, in the local end to earthly animosity between hostile families who become brothers in grief (5.3.297).

As many as five more Franciscans appear in a play written during Shakespeare's high tragic period, the so-called problem play and tragi-comedy, *Measure for Measure*, the only title in the entire canon that borrows from scripture, from Luke 6:38: "With the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again." Besides two minor Franciscan messengers and one minor cloistered Poor Clare, the heroine is Isabella, a Poor Clare novice who wants "a more strict restraint/Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of St. Clare" (1.3.4-5). She refuses to break her vow of chastity, holding too severely to Catholic moral theology's principle that an evil cannot be done in order to preserve a good. Vienna's Duke takes a leave of absence from his lustful polity in order to replace himself with an austere Puritanical religious, Angelo, who will tighten "strict statutes and most biting laws/The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds" that the former ruler had "let slip" (1.3.19, 21). The Duke then proceeds to stay in Vienna doing the corporal work of mercy of visiting prisoners, disguised as a Franciscan friar!

The Duke, in disguise as Friar Ludovico, attempts to find the virtuous mean in public morality between rigorism and laxity. He goes further in duplicity than any other Franciscan in Shakespeare by substituting Angelo's betrothed, Mariana, whom the selfish religious has dropped because she has lost her dowry, for Isabella, whom he wantonly covets, in a bed trick. The counterfeit Franciscan's point is to teach mildness to Angelo and to counsel moderation and mercy to the realm and audience by a lesson in moral frailty as the path to healthy rectitude. The measure of mercy that we all hope for as fallen creatures we should offer also to our fallen brothers and sisters. Once again, the Franciscan way is cunning, mild, but orthodox.

The mere name of Saint Francis serves as a term of reconciliation in Shakespeare. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, the heroine Helena, rejected by her selfish husband Bertram, whom she has captured in marriage by means of her late father's pharmacy, goes on a pilgrimage to St. James of Compostela to amend her faults "with sainted vow," and she finds refuge there in an inn named "Saint Francis." Her fault is hard to see but nonetheless crucial: failing to respect the freedom of her beloved. Neither she nor her husband is ready for total self-giving; he won't even kiss his newlywed goodbye, and she won his hand by royal order. In the canonical jurisdiction of Saint Francis, as it were, Helena consummates her marriage by a more wholesome bed trick: Bertram sleeps with her, thinking she is a maid whom he is seducing, the daughter of the widow who keeps the inn. When the trick is revealed at the end of the play, the cad appreciates her stratagem, is transformed, and promises to "love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (5.3.316). All's well that ends well. Once again, the Franciscan blessing, here by the mere mention of the name, operating theologically in the realm of created or cooperative grace, has mediated a true marriage by cunning and by vicarious sacrifice, and penance has

preceded sacrament. In all, there are at least ten Franciscan appearances in Shakespeare's plays, sometimes as slight as this one, as if the mere mention of the Poverello had a talismanic quality to bless, order, purify, and divinize action.

What can we conclude from Shakespeare's uses of the *nomen Franciscum?* Why Franciscans, and why

such positive roles, on a stage where Catholic religious orders would be suspect, even threatening to authority? First, dramaturgically, a Franciscan would be quickly, easily, and inexpensively identified. Second, popular respect for Franciscans as close followers of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience must have persisted in the English popular imagination despite the centuries-old anti-fraternal tradition—obedience to moral authority, not power, being the emphasis. Third, as an order with some inde-pendence, the Franciscans would not have been immediately associated with the hypocrisy, corruption, venality, and thirst for power often attributed to the Catholic hierarchy by Church of England partisans. While Franciscans come ready made in Shakespeare's source material, he probably saw them as robed crowd pleasers, even as the newly elected Pope instantly intuited their popularity on the contemporary anti-clerical world stage. Shakespeare's Franciscans are free-lancing power brokers, field operatives distant even from a prior's command, each in a tiny quasi-autonomous Church cell that administers in almost guerilla fashion the related sacraments of penance and marriage.

Similarly, there is something openly clandestine and perennially popular suggested by the Franciscan name that the current Holy Father's ongoing public relations *coups de théâtre* seize upon: it radiates holiness under the cover of a meek robe that hearkens back to Gospel humility, a humility that still attracts even a hostile audience, if we are to judge by the welcome that the media have shown Pope Francis. The very name of Francis itself spawns a nearly sacramental life: laid down, it calls forth at once authentic religion, sincere faith, simple poverty, open penance, commonsensical cunning, forgiving anti-Pharisaism, respect for creatures, clerical anti-clericalism—a disarming way to throw off the hoary charges of venality and worldliness against the established church. The Franciscan name unleashes a powerful rhetorical bonanza: it offers a way to reform without rupture, to revitalize tradition, to perpetuate a restoration, to evangelize the world in old-fashioned virtues that seem to revolutionize only because they have been forgotten. It's a disarming cloak by which the Church may go undercover even on Herself.

As the present Holy Father is a Jesuit with a Franciscan name, Shakespeare's Franciscans act like underground Jesuits evangelizing on the sly in Elizabethan England. The Non-Conformist yet traditional Catholic mind and heart of Francis flourish in Shakespeare's depiction of the venerable Franciscan order, which can appeal even to today's individualistic spirituality of the Nones, who generally resist the notion that organized religion can minister to human needs and frailty. They can look at a simple Franciscan and say instantly, as Cardinal Shönborn whispered to Cardinal Dolan at Pope Francis's inauguration Mass, "He speaks like Jesus."

THE MERCIFUL FRANCISCAN

A dynamic self-criticism of the Church is what the Franciscan name evokes in readers. What might have been, in addition to this cultural rhetorical effect, the deliberate rhetorical strategy in choosing Francis as the name by which to announce and shape this papacy? Understanding this side of the question is helped further by a look at one of the Holy Father's favorite books, a nineteenth-century epic novel that he has read at least three times and that he top-shelfed at the very beginning of his papacy to read again: *I Promessi Sposi,* by the Catholic revert Alessandro Manzoni, which Pope Francis recently assigned as marriage preparation reading to couples.

We're not far from the setting of Romeo and Juliet. Factious early seventeenth-century northern Italy, occupied by the proud Spanish Hapsburgs, torn to pieces by the Thirty Years' War during invasions by the French and the Germans, bullied by the *bravi* of imperious local potentates—this hostile territory impedes the marriage of a pious peasant couple in love, Renzo and Lucia. A holy Franciscan once again stands strong against the corrupt and violent aristocracy assaulting free marriage; he cooperates with Providence to prepare the couple for Holy Matrimony. Fra Cristoforo, a Christ-bearing Capuchin priest, like Saint Francis and Pope Francis, thinks of himself first as a middle-class sinner, having fled to a

Capuchin monastery hospital because he killed a noble in a prideful, angry duel of self-defense. For this sin of rashness, he has devoted his life to service of others, taking the name of his servant who intervened in that duel, but the rashness in his character becomes a holy righteous anger at injustice, a vice transfigured into virtue because of a new way of being. It is the sinner who most understands the logic of mercy; Fra Cristoforo instantiates the petition of Thomas More's prayer, which the Holy Father says he prays every day, asking the Lord to grant him "a simple soul that knows to treasure all that is good and that doesn't frighten easily at the sight of evil, but rather finds the means to put things back in their place."

"With the strength of two men" and using a "thread that Providence has put in [his] hand," (dropped by a character named Egidio, after the fourth follower of St. Francis), Cristoforo does what the Church as the dishonest steward often does to thwart evil authorities and as Jesuit Provincial Bergoglio did in Argentina: he hides the innocent soul in church property.

It is tempting to imagine what Father Jorge, Cardinal Bergoglio, and Pope Francis enjoyed and gleaned from this epic tale: the sacred diptych of the humble but determined Capuchin and the saintly Federigo Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, an episcopal model, who empties his purse to save his flock from famine, smelling his sheep in the streets of his dying city; the foil of the cowardly parish priest Don Abbondio, whom Borromeo scolds for fleeing the martyr's call and committing the sin of spiritual worldliness; certainly the minute-by-minute conversion story of the Innominato, the Unnamed, the Godfather of rural Milan, whose mounting existential crisis of despair shatters as the luminous Lucia's desperate prayers are followed by church bells rung for the local levee of Borromeo, who in turn receives the weeping confession of this monstrous carbine-toting Prodigal Son like the generous father in Luke; the lazaretto sanctuary in Milan staffed by the Capuchins, from which the Holy Father could have easily gotten the metaphor of the church as a field hospital. These heroes, whether peasants or merchants or archbishops, are little; they all stoop and empty themselves; they are epic heroes who kneel. In Pope Francis, it's as if Fra Cristoforo or Federigo Borromeo walked out of Manzoni's humble epic into the crowd around St. Peter's, bent over, and kissed the deformed man.

Manzoni's depiction of rural Milan as the gift of good earth (though subject to drought and famine) could be behind the "caress of God in soil, mountains, and water" in paragraph 85 of *Laudato Si'*. The simple power of "little daily actions" from para. 211 in the same encyclical could be taken from the care of religious and peasants during the plague and Borromeo's insistence on wearing "clothes which were not merely simple, but austere." After all, Borromeo's "behavior, his whole way of life, was in keeping with his dress." Certainly we can see Pope Francis in this description. Pope Francis even imitates Borromeo's literary flair and library patronage, not a great original scholar perhaps, but a man in whose life "study played a part." Francis's turned phrases—smell the sheep, sourpusses, spiritual Alzheimer's, *hacer lío*—come from eyes and ears that, like Shakespeare's and Manzoni's (the father of modern Italian), saw and heard rough simple people and yet also read the best books seriously. Whose portrait might this be?

His eye was serious and yet lively, his forehead calm and thought-ful. His white hair, his pallor, all the marks of abstinence, meditation and laborious days, could not hide a sort of virginal bloom and vigour….now the habits of serious and benevolent thought, the inner peace of a long and virtuous life, the love of mankind and the continuous joy of an ineffable hope had planted there that other beauty old men sometimes have which struck the eye all the more when framed in the magnificent simplicity of the purple.

Or, to update the portrait, the simplicity of white. Borromeo prefigured Bergoglio.

Manzoni's portrayal of the faithful Catholic couple, pious in devotions, deferential to hierarchy, obedient to catechetical teaching, even more scrupulous than the scrupulous Capuchin, presents, however, a

hermeneutical knot in Pope Francis's theology of the People of Faith. If his own understanding of the Argentine *pueblo fiel,* who he once said teach the Church "not what to love but how to love," owes something to the depiction of Renzo and Lucia, where is the *pueblo* now *fiel*? Where do couples still wait? Where do they look to the clergy for matrimonial guidance, consecrate themselves to the Blessed Mother, honor ecclesiastical authority, and run to church bells? Where do they betroth themselves and suffer for a vow? A scholar of historical fiction and a Jansenist-influenced step-child of the Enlightenment, Manzoni himself probably looked back nostalgically to an imagined earlier popular Catholicism for fictional luminosity after the devastating French Revolution. If there is still a Fra Cristoforo and Federico Borromeo in the chair of Peter, are there still Renzos and Lucias in the laity? To put it in Pope Francis's language, have the existential peripheries also been infected by spiritual worldliness? The American suburbs have been. The answer may be in the novel itself, scattered in a plague-and-war ravaged society as two or three mustard seeds gathered in His name, or five or six.

It misses the heart of the book, however, and would be a Pelagian misreading of it to speak of the sinful saintly characters as the only heroes, for no doubt the Pope of Mercy saw that the novel's real unspoken protagonist is the Father of Mercies. It is He who has welcomed the Unnamed Prodigal, bought time for a nearly illiterate peasant couple until experience and trial have wizened them for Holy Matrimony. and permitted a terrifying plague of justice to take the wheat and tares. God's mercy moves by Providence, silently pulling the clapper for Borromeo's arrival, making the church bells simultaneously gong in the hollow solitude of the Unnamed's despair, further twisting and turning Egidio's thread. The rain that cleanses Milan late in the book is a long rain of mercy. The two biggest plot turns in the book come not from the characters but as the result of a sovereign but silent God managing coincidences and the weather to bring good out of both moral and natural evil. In *I Promessi Sposi,* God "mercies and chooses," "getting in there first" (as Pope Francis puts it in Spanish): *eligendo, miserando, y primereando.*

SAINT FRANCIS: THE JOYFUL ASCETIC

It is rumored that Cardinal Bergoglio is an honorary member of the Argentinian Chesterton Society. It may be a Facebook hoax, but if he has read any Chesterton it's quite possibly the famous sketch on Saint Francis, perhaps recommended by his "dear friend," the late Methol Ferré from Uruguay, one of many Chestertonian converts to Catholicism. We have seen the cunning and merciful Franciscans, who maintain doctrinal purity and practice pastoral flexibility, but Chesterton recovers an aspect in Francis himself that Lawrence, Isabella, and Cristoforo don't show. In his second book, *Twelve Types,* Chesterton turns the popular image of Francis as the penitent ascetic on its head. "Ascetism, in the religious sense," he writes, "is the repudiation of the great mass of human joys because of the supreme joyfulness of the one joy, religious joy." Moreover, he continues, "all true joy expresses itself in terms of asceticism." The athlete and the artist give up everything for the narrow but intense joys of sport and art. The "amazingly unworldly almost maddenly simple-minded infant" Francis was nevertheless "one of the most consistently successful men that ever fought with this bitter world" because "he believed in other people." For him laughter was "as divine as tears. He called his monks the mountebanks of God. He never forgot to take pleasure in a bird [see Pope Francis with the parakeet] as it flashed past him, or a drop of water as it fell from his finger." He understood "that the mere assertion that this raging and confounding universe is governed by justice and mercy is a piece of staggering optimism fit to set all men capering."

Chesterton transports the paradoxes contained in this short essay to his longer, later "sketch" on Francesco, or "Frenchy," the troubadour for Christ, who came just as the Western world was recovering from a long "penance" or "purgation" from paganism, the doctrine that worshiped nature for its health and produced the sicknesses of Nero. The Gospel had brought the cure, the "glad good news" of the doctrine of "original sin." Lust and cruelty had not been eradicated, but they had been cleansed. Thus,

the rich young man shucked his finery over for the beggar, took up the poverty of Christ, and burst into song, a Jongleur de Dieu. He did not cultivate simplicity like Tolstoy or modern vegetarians, but simply took what food and clothing fell in his path. Treating “the mob of men like a mob of kings,” he counseled a gloomy follower to find “faith in friendship.” In poverty and freedom, Francis imitated Christ, approximated Christ, mirrored Christ.

Indeed, Chesterton asserts, if Francis was like Christ, “Christ was like Francis.” As the moon is the mirror of the sun, it is less vivid but more visible. “In the story of Assisi,” which ends with stigmata, the “casket which was locked in Palestine” was “un locked in Umbria; for the Church is the keeper of keys.” And then, in a sentence that may be downright prophetic so aptly it might apply to the last two pontificates, “What Benedict had stored, Francis scattered.” The granary of truth was opened for the mob of men. Goodness is understood through rigor and diffused through joy.

Chesterton, however, is not so much a democrat that he does not see a danger in the Franciscan way. The danger was not in Francis but in subsequent Franciscans, who were not as clean or as clear as their saint. Where he had eschewed private property, they wished to abolish property. The matter was settled by a man smaller than a saint, the Pope, who declared that the world was made not only for Franciscans. He decided that Christendom should absorb Francis rather than that Francis should absorb Christendom. The saint was a poet, but the Church needed more than Franciscan poetry. It also needed Benedictine prose. It already had an old religion. It did not need a new one. He gave up a wife and children. Some of his followers, like the Cathars, wanted to give up marriage. He maintained a thread of sanity in his “grammar of gratitude,” “too humble to be a heresiarch.” “*Ubi Petrus*,” Chesterton concludes, “*ibi Franciscus*.”

Papa Francesco, the joyful ascetic, the Jesuitical monk, has told the story of how the name came to him. “Don’t forget the poor,” Franciscan Cardinal Hummes urged just after he had accepted the election. At that moment the name appeared. As G.K. Chesterton described this moment, ninety years before it occurred, “all that reforming energy of medieval and modern times” went “to the burden of Deus est Deus Pauperum.” God is God of the Poor. Francis had almost rechristened God the Father.

So what’s in the name Francis? Cunning, courage, mercy, providence, daring, austerity, and joy. Who would not find them in our Pope, too? Chesterton’s Latinism is now literal: “*Ubi Petrus, ibi Franciscus.*”

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