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There is an almost comical story as to how St. Francis gained his first companion and follower. Before St Francis had taken religious vows to be a monk, although he had renounced the world, he was already given to such a level of penance and mortification that many thought he was out of his mind. Even at this early period of his religious life, he was scoffed at as a madman, he was rejected and despised by family, friends, and strangers, who threw stones and mud at him when he passed; yet he went on his way, accepting these insults as patiently as if he had been deaf and dumb. Bernard of Assisi, one of the richest and most learned nobles of the city, was deeply moved by the behavior of St Francis; how utterly he despised the world, how patiently he suffered injuries, and how his faith remained firm, though he had been for two years an object of scorn and contempt by all. He was convinced that Francis must have received a special grace from God to allow him to lead such a life, and so he invited him to eat and sleep in his own house. Once his guest had arrived, Bernard, ordered a bed to be prepared for St. Francis. St Francis, to conceal his sanctity, so soon as he entered the room, threw himself upon the bed, pretending to fall asleep. Bernard soon after went to bed himself and pretended to snore. On this, St Francis, thinking that Bernard was fast asleep, got up and began to pray. Raising his hands and eyes to heaven, he exclaimed with great devotion and fervor, *My God! my God!* at the same time weeping bitterly; and thus he remained on his knees all night, repeating with great love and fervor the words, *My God! my God!*¹

Bernard, watching by the light of a lamp the devout prayers of St Francis, was so moved by the Holy Spirit, that he resolved then and there to change his life. The very next morning, he called St Francis, and said: *Brother Francis, I am disposed in heart wholly to leave the world, and to obey thee in all things as thou shalt command me.*² At these words, St Francis rejoiced in spirit and said, *Bernard, a resolution such as thou speakest of is so difficult and so great an act, that we must take counsel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and pray to him that he may be pleased to show us what is his will and may teach us to follow it. Let us then go together to the Bishop's palace, where we shall find a good priest who will say Mass for us. We will then remain in prayer till the third hour, imploring the Lord to point out to us the way he wishes us to select, and so they set out*

¹ Excerpts from the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*. lectionarycentral.com/trinity08/FrancisAssisi.html

² Ibid.

together, heard Mass, and after they had remained in prayer till the time fixed, the priest, at the request of St Francis, took up the Missal, and opened it. According to legend, the missal opened on the Gospel in which Jesus said, *If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.* And Bernard did as the Gospel commanded him.³

But why did they take the Gospel so literally? Why give everything up to follow Jesus? Because in the divine economy of Grace we must recognize our indebtedness to Christ so profoundly that we are gladly willing to give up everything for Him. Christ has turned the material world on its head. We are indebted to Christ, to such an extent that we can never pay Him back. And yet it is through our great debt to Christ that we experience Life more abundant. Indebtedness to the world, material debt, is the very opposite, it is anxiety, stress, and turmoil. And yet we are reminded that our relationship with God goes far beyond debt, but we are also claimed as God's very own, He is our Father, and we are His children. Like our earthly, biological parents, we are indebted to God the Father for giving us life, and life eternal. And this is grace, that He who has come down into the depths of our human experience, makes us heirs with Him. We are not just indebted, but inheritors of life everlasting and every promise of Heaven.

Who would have thought that someone's conversion could include a saint pretending to be asleep? And yet we have the very words of our Lord, *by their fruits you shall know them.* True saints of God cannot hide their devotion and fervency for Jesus Christ for too long. True sinners cannot fake their devotion and fervency for Jesus Christ for too long either. St. Francis and Bernard teach us that the Spirit-led life of devotion, fervency, and obedience to Jesus Christ is for everyone. The spiritual fruit of which cannot be hid under a bushel, nor even by pretending to be asleep. But before we say to ourselves, this must just be for the great saints of old, like St. Francis, or St. Benedict, or St. John the Baptist, let us remember that every Christian is called to a deeper relationship with God marked by sincere devotion and obedience to Christ. We learn from the saints of the Church that the Spirit-led life of obedience is for everyone, regardless of their vocation, marriage, or family life. As the Epistle reminds us, we are all called to be the Sons of God by adoption and grace, and to pour out our lives in love and obedience to our Lord and Savior.

³ Excerpts from *the Little Flowers of St. Francis*. lectionarycentral.com/trinity08/FrancisAssisi.html

We have received the Spirit of Adoption, all through the Holy Spirit, whereby we cry, *Abba, Father*. This great spiritual truth aids us in doing the will of the Father, when we like, St. Francis, or Bernard, live in the Son, and the Son lives in us, and we let go of all fear in our lives. When we repent and turn to Jesus, He lets us live in Him, and we let Him live in us, so that we become sons of God by adoption and grace, and co-heirs with the Son. We release and manifest this truth in Holy Baptism, when we are born again into the new life of obedience, and sonship by the Holy Spirit. This calls us out and sets us apart from materialism and popular fads of the world. We should recognize daily that we are in this world, but not of this world, our loyalty and obedience is to be found only in Jesus Christ. And this is the faith that we have been sealed into through the Sacrament Confirmation. This is what is nourished in us by Holy Communion, what we are restored to by Absolution, what we share and reveal through Holy Matrimony, what we are healed to in Holy unction, and all of which is released and spread by the Holy Spirit through frail humanity in the mystery of Holy Orders. Through Word and Sacrament, we live, as all the saints of old did, under, in, and through, the Blood of the One who cleanses and renews us.

We gather now around the altar of God, to receive the heavenly Food which is so profitable for our souls. Here we cry along with St. Francis, *My God, My God*, and with St. Thomas, *My Lord and My God*. Here even our imperfect attempts at devotion and fervency are rewarded with the very Body and Blood of Christ, for here, in the Holy Spirit, through God's dear Son, we begin to learn the spirit of true sonship. Amen.