



THE ST. FRANCIS OPTION

by Bret Thoman, OFS

You may have heard about a new book called, *Benedict Option*. It draws on the example of St. Benedict, who fled the decadence of Rome to live in the mountains as a hermit and began guiding others in monasticism. While

western society entered into a centuries-long period of decline, religious life flourished in the monasteries as monks safeguarded not only the Christian life, but also western culture.

In an ever more decadent society, the “Benedict Option” argues for today’s Christians to similarly retreat from society, live in strong faith-based communities, and a re-evangelize our culture from the outside.

But does God really want Christians to withdraw from the world? Is there another way? What about a “St. Francis Option”?

You probably know that Francis, like Benedict, often retreated up to the mountains for retreats. Early in his conversion, Francis found great solace in hermitages away from the problems of the world. His biographer wrote: “He frequently chose solitary places so that he could direct his mind completely to God” (Celano, *First Life*, Chapter 27, 71).

On the mountaintop, Francis surely loved God with all his “heart, soul, and mind.” And, likely, he also felt freedom -- from people, their problems and difficulties. For Francis, the mountains were like the vertical beam of the cross -- the part that pointed up, to God.

This is the “transcendent” aspect of Francis’ spirituality. And here Francis appears to be have exercised the “Benedict Option.”

However, like Peter, who also wished to build “three tents” and stay on Mt. Tabor (see Matthew 17:4), Francis was not to remain in permanent retreat. And

here the Benedict Option for Francis ends. Francis (like Peter) had to descend back down to the “valley” where his work would be carried out.

And there God revealed how he wished for him to live: he renounced his possessions, rebuilt churches, began to preach, and begged for alms. Yet the culmination of his conversion was when he embraced a leper (see “Testament” 4).

In serving the marginalized, Francis embraced that other aspect of Christian spirituality: Immanence. For the cross has two beams -- vertical, as well as horizontal. Down in the valley, Francis would live out the second imperative of the Gospel: loving “neighbor as oneself.”

Thus, the charism given to Francis was not solely one of retreat or flight; it was also one of service to people. Yet, Francis continued to periodically return to the mountains for retreat and prayer throughout his entire life. Thus, Francis spent his life alternating back and forth between the mountains and valley.

In this, Francis was really walking in the pathway of much bigger footsteps. For it was Christ himself who prayed in solitude and served people. For though Christ “often withdrew to the wilderness to pray” (Luke 5:16), he always returned back down to the valley where he preached, healed, performed miracles and taught.

Francis’s life thus would not be prayer alone or ministry alone; it would be both the contemplative and active life, alternating between the mountains and the valleys. It was transcendent, as well as immanent. Francis’s mountains would include Sinai as well as the Mount of Beatitudes. Never the first or the second -- but both -- one in fulfillment of the other.

This is known as the “total Gospel life.” And it is what I would call the “St. Francis Option.”

During these uncertain times in our country and world, may the “St. Francis Option” offer us direction, as well as hope.

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