

Little Weeds



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Some years ago, during a visit to Italy, I ventured into the gift shop adjacent to the pensione I was staying at. I saw some stamps in the display case and figured that if I could get some airmail stamps there, it'd save me a trip to the PO. So I asked the lady behind the counter if she had any airmail stamps. She stared very nicely and politely back at me. It was obvious she had no idea what I was talking about. Not being able to remember Italian for "airmail," I lapsed into my best French accent: "*Par avion!*" (Actually, my French accent is quite good – it's the language that escapes me.) But she didn't understand that either.

Great! There I was in the middle of Rome, in the middle of Italy, and I had to run into a shop lady who spoke neither English nor French. Go figure. But I wanted the stamps, and she seemed friendly enough. So I repeated the phrase in both languages a few times, getting the same friendly stare.

Then, whether it was inspiration or desperation, I don't know, but I tucked my fingertips into their respective armpits and started flapping my arms up and down, all the while saying excitedly, "Airmail, airmail! *Par avion, par avion!*" The light bulb went on. Her head bobbed up and down: she understood my request. Her head wagged side to side: she didn't have any airmail stamps. Alas and alack! (Whatever that means.)

Yet the exchange had not been a total loss. She'd come away with a great "crazy American" story to tell her family over the dinner table, and I'd learned exactly how far I would toss my dignity for some airmail stamps. But the experience also reaffirmed a simple fact: if you stay open, stuff can get in.

If she'd shrugged her shoulders and walked off as soon as it was obvious I wasn't gonna say anything she could understand, or if I'd rolled my eyes and walked off when it was obvious she wasn't gonna understand anything I said, we'd never have connected. But we stayed open to one another, and we did connect.

That's how it is with God. You have to stay open. Francis did. He heard God tell him to rebuild His church. Granted, he didn't fully understand at first. But he didn't sit around musing about it. He didn't shut down figuring now that God had spoken to him, he didn't have to listen anymore. He acted while

remaining open to any other memos from on high. And he eventually got it straight.

Prayer is often called a conversation with God. ('Course, I've also heard that when you talk to God, it's called prayer; and when God talks to you, it's called schizophrenia. But that's another column . . .) That (the conversation thing) is a good way of seeing it, provided you follow through with the analogy: a conversation goes *both* ways. You wouldn't talk to your friend, then turn your back and walk away before they could respond. Nor would you like it if someone pulled that with you. Yet we do it with God all the time.

We say a bunch o' beads at Him, throw a litany or two His way, and then go about our own business. If we don't get what we wanted, we figure He either didn't hear us or didn't answer. But we never stop doing our own thing or shut up long enough for Him to get through.

Francis learned that the more you listen to God, the more you *have to listen* to God. Once you've started doing what He asks, you have to keep checking in to make sure you're on the right track. Francis didn't spend the entire rest of his life hauling masonry around, did he? God was able to set him straight. But not even God could've done that if Francis hadn't remained open to Him.

A good way to pray is to just sit still and not say anything. No formula prayers, no special phrases. Just sit still, close your eyes, and listen to your breathing. I read once that every breath you take is God saying, "I love you." And that's always a good way to start a conversation!

Brother Juniper



"I get nobler thoughts in a hammock than I ever get mowing grass."

By Fred McCarthy, SFO