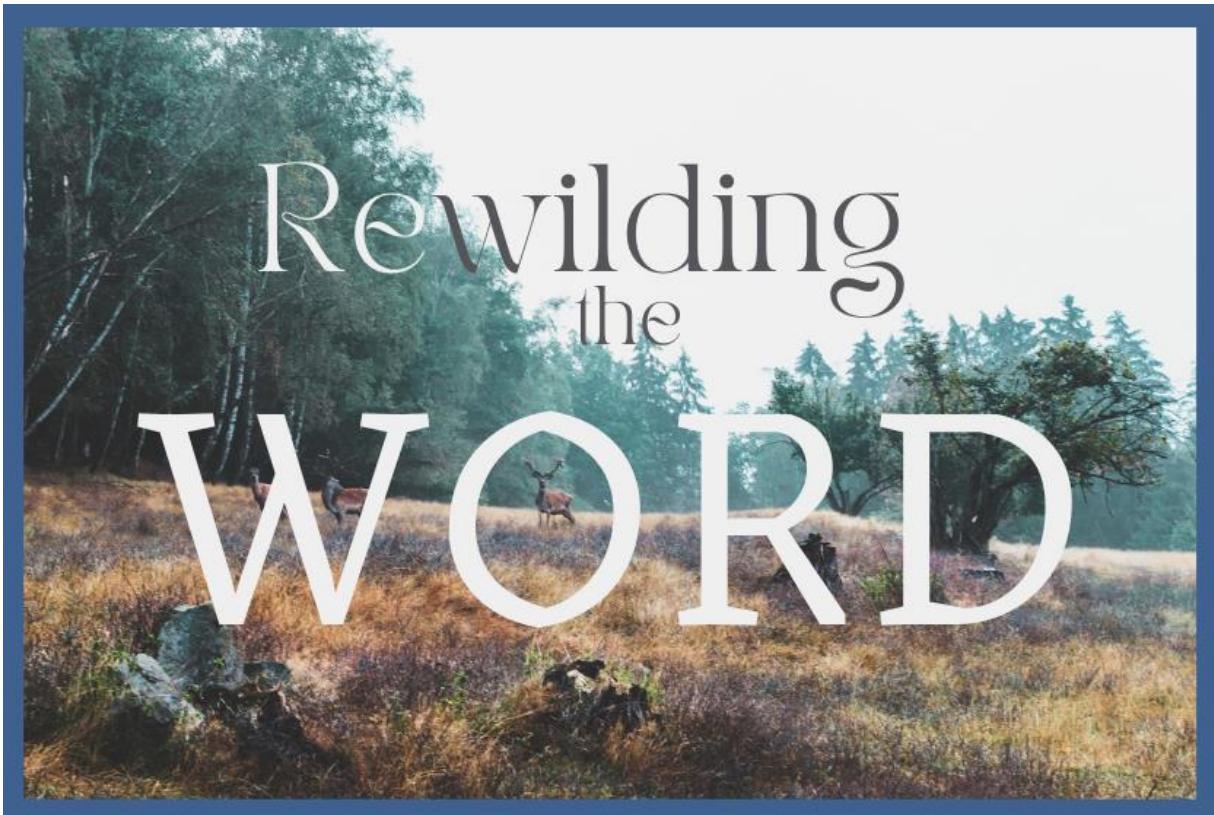

GANZ - REWILDING THE WORD #3 (AUGUST 2023)



A Story

During my late 20s, I studied at Regis College (Jesuit) at the University of Toronto, for my Master of Divinity degree. In the fall Term of my second year, I begged Fr. Michael McMahon Sheenan, CSB¹ to break a few rules (for a holy cause of course) and to let me into his Seminar. He made it happen, even though I had not been formally admitted as

¹ Historian **Fr. Michael M. Sheehan, CSB (1925-1992)** died following a bicycle accident in Toronto on August 23, 1992. He had been quietly battling cancer for some time and during his last year had carefully journaled successive incidents of small seizures. Michael was born in Renfrew, Ontario and entered the Congregation of St. Basil in 1943. He completed undergraduate work at St. Michael's College in 1947, theological studies at St. Basil's Seminary in 1951 and graduate studies at the École des Hautes Études, University of Paris, in 1953. From that year he resided on St. Joseph Street where he completed graduate studies at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (PIMS) and pursued his vocation as teacher, researcher, and mentor.

a student at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies (PIMS). I had one of the most profound semesters of my life learning from St. Francis of Assisi, guided by a professor who had spent his life researching and loving St. Francis.

I had been trying to understand at the time why I felt such distrust of “reform” and of “reformers” – in every institution in which a purported “reform” was under way. And it was always (and fruitlessly) under way.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to reform**” – **1.a. 1606** – “The action or process of making changes in an institution, organization, or aspect of social or political life, so as to remove errors, abuses, or other hindrances to proper performance.”

I had an intuition that St. Francis of Assisi was someone whom I needed to meet. I wanted to understand the reform that *he himself* was.²

During that year I established two convictions.

First, reform typically is an attempt to establish something “new” rather than to *repent* of the bad habits that distorted the original “form” – *the pattern of habits and people and values for which an Institution had been known and esteemed* – and to re-establish that form. A person may “re-form” a form of life that has become “de-formed”.³

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to repent**” – **1.a. - c1300 - intransitive.** To review one's actions and feel contrition or regret for something one has done or omitted to do; (*esp. in religious contexts*) to acknowledge the sinfulness of one's past action or conduct by showing sincere remorse and undertaking to reform in the future.

I had found myself starting to wonder whether reformers are what we are left with when true leaders have disappeared.

Reformers typically want to put into place something new. They do not want, or do not know how, to lead an Institution through a painful process of self-reflection (and sometimes profound embarrassment) and to acknowledge the active and passive

² His luminous life caused in western Christianity a profound “turning” from centuries of reflection on the pre-existent Son of God become incarnate to a new and sustained contemplation of the humble Jesus of Nazareth. He taught us to pay close attention to the *accessible* Trinity revealed in the person of the *approachable* Jesus, born in a stable among the animals – “Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures.”

³ I remember a tag line of the Carthusian Order of monks (founded by St. Bruno of Cologne around 1084 CE) that reads: *numquam reformata, quia numquam deformata*; which translated is: “Never reformed because never deformed.” See, for example:

<https://www.textmanuscripts.com/blog/entry/05-21-never-reformed-because-never-deformed>.

complicity of all in the self-destruction of something that had been important and necessary for the common good. But a *leader* is willing to do this. And he or she might with the grace of God, find again the “form” of the original grace – what had made a particular Institution beloved and precious and important and effective – and re-establish it.

St. Francis was a leader, I concluded, not a reformer. Pope Francis, his namesake, is also.

Second, “reform”, according to the definition (see above), means “making changes”. But it had been my experience that reformers would “make changes” without noticing how distorted they themselves were in relation to the original “form”. Inevitably, the “new” that they tried to establish was simply another form of distortion, one with a new look and feel. Sort of like “Make us great again,” which is, well, grating.

St. Francis was *himself* something new; a new way of being a human being – “new” in exactly the way that Jesus Christ was new - “See, I make all things new!”. St. Francis was a child of God after the “form” of Jesus.

G.K. Chesterton once quipped: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”⁴ That year in Toronto, I discovered in the person of St. Francis of Assisi a *leader* – the real deal. He was a person who accepted the difficulty of turning the Christian ideal (Christianity) into a living and luminous example of it (a Christian). St. Francis found the original “form” of Christianity: a person, the God-Man, Jesus Christ. And by *loving* Him, St. Francis, step by step, became *like* Him. Francis was Christ-like: the “form” of human being without distortion whose greatest power is that of an “unworldly”⁵ love changing the world. Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)⁶, during a time when she was doing a close study of St. Augustine, wrote:

⁴ *What's Wrong with the World*, Part I, chapter 5, “The Unfinished Temple.”

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**worldly**” - 4. - 1340 - “Of a person: engrossed in or devoted to temporal affairs, esp. the pursuit of wealth and pleasure; concerned with material values. Of an action or attribute: relating to or characterized by devotion to temporal affairs.”

⁶ From the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century. Born into a German-Jewish family, she was forced to leave Germany in 1933 and lived in Paris for the next eight years, working for a number of Jewish refugee organisations. In 1941 she immigrated to the United States and soon became part of a lively intellectual circle in New York. She held a number of academic positions at various American universities until her death in 1975.... The first, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, was a study of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes that generated a wide-ranging debate on the nature and historical antecedents of the totalitarian phenomenon. The second, *The Human Condition*, published in 1958, was an

“For love, although it is *one of the rarest occurrences in human lives* ... indeed possesses an unequaled clarity of vision for the disclosure of who precisely [the other is], because it is unconcerned to the point of *total unworldliness* with what the loved person may be, with his or her qualities and shortcomings no less than with his or her achievements, failings, and transgressions. **Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others [and from the natural world – from “creatures”]** ... Love, by its very nature, is *unworldly*, and it is for this reason, rather than by its rarity, that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.”⁷

A Text

The Canticle⁸ of the Creatures by St. Francis of Assisi

Section I (of three)⁹ written in the Spring of 1225

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor,
and all blessing.

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no mortal is worthy to mention Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

original philosophical study that investigated the fundamental categories of the *vita activa* (labor, work, action).”

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.242. Her profound thoughts of love were developed by her close reading of **St. Augustine (354-430 CE)**.

⁸ A “canticle” is a “hymn or song”. In other words, we are meant to hear St. Francis of Assisi not *reciting* this but *singing* it. What a privilege to have been able to hear him singing this in the last year and months before his death in October 1226.

⁹ Section II was composed in September 1226 and Section III in the weeks right after that, when he was quickly approaching his death on 3 October 1226.

Praise be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night, and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

A Reading¹⁰

“Most High¹¹, all powerful, good Lord” – “Most High” is an adjective specifying a noble of highest rank (politically) – the courteous acknowledgment by a person of lower rank for one higher, in this case, of the highest rank. Given the whole tone of this *Canticle* of St. Francis, we should understand “Most High” to mean a person for whom St. Francis had the utmost esteem; as he composed the *Canticle* he was feeling intensely the preciousness of God, the dearness of God. It is one thing to be in long friendship with someone; it is another thing when sometimes one feels for him or her *admiration*, when one feels moved by the sheer *preciousness* of his or her friend.

“Praises ... be praised ... praised be” – The English verb “to praise” first appeared in English texts in the year 1225, the year when St. Francis composed the first of the three sections of this famous *Canticle*. If God were to allow us to experience Him through the created world, as God allowed St. Francis to experience Him, then we could not help

¹⁰ Remember that it is the purpose of these *Rewilding the Word* essays to pay close attention to particular words and phrases in famous texts, approaching the words and phrases with reverence, asking for better insight into the meaning that they open to us. By doing this, we seek a deeper appreciation of what the author of the text meant for us to understand by his or her whole text, and with him or her to experience what he or she experienced.

¹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective “**high**” - **II.8.a. Old English** - “Of a person or his or her attributes: of exalted rank, status, dignity, or estimation. Also, of a person's reputation or position in society: exalted, favoured, **highly esteemed**.”

but feel that praise was the only adequate response. (By analogy, watch a video of a crowd spontaneously *praising* Taylor Swift performing her songs on her Eras Tour – 17 March to 23 November 2023.) We are not commanded to praise God; how absurd that would be. What we ask is that God would reveal Himself to us in so clear and beautiful a way that praise of God would be the only thing that we could or would desire to do. (Jesus' whole earthly life was about, "If you all knew the Father as I do, then what JOY and LIFE you would become!") St. Francis wanted those who sang his *Canticle* to experience what he had experienced, to feel as he did: an unqualified admiration for the Creator of all things – our "Most High, all powerful, good Lord".

An Action

On some of the mornings during these lovely late summer and early autumn mornings, sit outside with your coffee, close your eyes, and let your ears be directed solely to the sound of the "creatures" alive and communicating all around you – their voices and the sounds of their movements coming to you on the morning air. Let yourself imagine that they are "praising" the "Most High" Creator; that they are doing this better than you do it. Feel the happiness that St. Francis felt when noticing them.