

VISIO



DIVINA

The Wisdom of Contemplative Vision

EFFACEMENT AND WINGS

Francis of Assisi

In life St. Francis knew something profound about death. He had experienced both living and also forms of dying about which he speaks powerfully in this poem. He was courageous, giving up what the world around him considered essential for something little understood by his contemporaries. He had died in important ways to his own history and culture.

Having been born into a prominent Italian family, St. Francis stepped aside from the power that was his birth-right and became a monk. He was born into the privilege that his family possessed, but surrendered it to up take a place of humility and powerlessness. He lost the world he had known. In an act of self surrender, for the good of all, he lost face, honor and prestige in the eyes of his own society.

It takes courage to die, certainly in the way that St. Francis experienced it. Physical death is certainly a courageous act for many—the physical letting go of life here on planet earth. Ego-death, however, is perhaps far more difficult and excruciating in some ways because one also continue to live. It is a form of dying that is often said to be unspeakable. St. Francis called it a “holy death”—a sacred death occurring in a special way, but placing an individual in the category of angels.

Human-like beings with wings are typically called angels—messengers from beyond the normal human world. St. Francis appears to be saying that a human being who is asked to walk through effacements of this kind are given some kind of angelic status or power.

They are allowed to experience forms of transcendence that are often not experienced or even acknowledge my most humans.

Early on, the Hebrew prophets speak about “being lifted up on wings” as a form of ascension (Isaiah 40:31). Perhaps the humblest, who have been reduced to humiliation and dust are given a way of ascending not afforded to many even while they live upon the earth.

Perhaps we did not know that we have the capacity for growing wings. We relegate wings to other beings, but we consider ourselves to be wingless, but according to Franc’s vision that is not true? But the prices is high, death, and perhaps it takes a catalyst like dying to grown human wings—the pain of dying into effacement.

There is a teaching in the wisdom tradition that says we must descend in order to fly upwards. All this is counter-intuitive for most of us, as perhaps it was to Francis, but he learned it, and grew what may be for us, invisible wings. It is said that his life of service was closest to the path of the Master, Yeshua, whom he loved. It is also remembered that in service to the world, he loved it fully and all its sentient beings.

St. Francis (1181-1226) began his life as a privileged son in a wealthy family in Italy, but the experiences of life as a soldier changed him. He went on to chose a life of holy poverty, founding a community of friars who brought a message of love and peace to the world. His message and his memory has spread around the world. Images of him are found everywhere.

Reflections on Image and Text:

1. *What is effacement—losing face? What are our experiences of this as a human beings? How have you ever experienced this in your life?*
2. *How is effacement like dying? Why would St. Francis metaphorically connect these?*
3. *St. Francis sees effacement as a sacred form of dying even while living. How would you describe that death?*
4. *Can the soul hold God in embrace even while living on the earth? Can the soul ascend into such an intimacy with God?*
5. *It might be instructive for you to explore the life of St. Francis a remarkable Italian saint. What does his life teach you?*
6. *It is said that Francis had a special affinity to the wild creatures of the world and that they were attracted to him. Why do you think this is true?*
7. *Do you agree that painful effacement will unfurl human wings and allow humans to ascend to God? How do you see this happening?*
8. *As you contemplate the illumination for this poem you can see that ascension arises in some way out of defeat and death. What does this image evoke inside of you? Journal your insights and feelings.*

A Place for Notes and your Journaling:

This reflection, text and its illumination have been provided by Alison Hine and Lynn Bauman as a means for contemplative prayer.

LECTIO DIVINA

The Contemplative Reading of a Sapiential Text

*T*here is a courageous
dying.

It is called effacement.
That holy death unfurls
our spirit's wings
and allows us
to embrace God
even as we stand
upon the earth.

—*St. Francis of Assisi*
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Contemplating
THE ILLUMINATION





