

THE ST. FRANCIS OPTION

by Bret Thoman, OFS

You may have heard of a book titled, *The Benedict Option*. It draws on the example of St. Benedict, who fled the decadence of early sixth-century Rome to live in the mountains as a hermit. He began guiding others in monasticism and eventually wrote a Rule. While western society entered into a centuries-long period of decline, religious life flourished in Benedictine monasteries, where monks safeguarded not only the Christian life, but also culture.

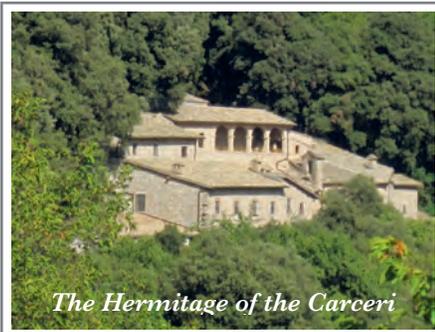
In an ever more decadent society today, the Benedict Option argues that contemporary Christians should similarly retreat from society, live in strong faith-based communities, and re-evangelize the culture from the outside.

But does God really want Christians to withdraw from the world? Is there another way?

What about a “St. Francis Option”?

St. Francis, like Benedict, also retreated to the mountains for prayer. Thomas of Celano wrote: “He frequently chose solitary places so that he could direct his mind completely to God” (*First Life*, Chapter 27, 71). He would often go to the mountain hermitages where he found great solace away from the world.

On the mountaintop, Francis fulfilled the first part of the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord,



The Hermitage of the Carceri

your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Surely, he felt freedom from the world with all its problems and difficulties, as

well as its contaminations and vices.

Here Francis appears to have exercised the “Benedict Option.”

Francis was drawn so strongly to the hermitages that he once felt tempted to take on the life of a hermit permanently. Not trusting in his own discernment, he asked a friar, Sylvester, as well as St. Clare and the sisters of San Damiano to pray for him to know the will of God. Clare and the sisters received the same response as Brother Sylvester: Francis was called by God not only for himself, but to bear fruit and bring others to God. He had to continue preaching, they told him. (See *Fioretti*, chapter 16).

Hence the hermitage for Francis was to be temporary, never permanent. It was not a monastery. Francis was called to leave his beloved retreat and go back down to the valley to serve the lepers, the community, and the Church.

Here the Benedict Option for Francis ends.

The charism given to Francis was not one of retreat or flight; it was one to both prayer and service.

In serving the lepers, Francis was responding to the second and complementary part of Jesus’ great commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

This dichotomy was the characteristic hallmark of his spirituality. Francis would spend his life retreating temporarily to the mountains followed by a return to the valley. Going up to remain alone with the transcendent God in prayer to receive strength and coming down to the valley to serve the lepers and preach in the cities.



Statue of Francis serving the leper at Rivotorto

This was known as the “Total Gospel Life” in Francis’ era. And it is what could be called the “St. Francis Option” in our own.

The St. Francis Option challenges us to discern the delicate balance between the contemplative life and the active life. It balances the

response of the two sisters, Mary and Martha – the one who listened to Jesus’s voice, as well as the one who looked after his needs (see Matthew 26:6-13). It keeps the gaze fixed on God above but does not avoid dirtying one’s feet and hands in the world below.

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

May the example of St. Francis guide us in discerning our decisions for this new year.

Bret Thoman, OFS’s newest book is: *The Knight and the Lady: A Journey into the Spirituality of Saints Francis and Clare*