4-1-2013

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**Recommended Citation**


Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/36
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Abstract
Roberto Rossellini's The Flowers of St. Francis (1950) represents the saint’s humility through the director’s humble style. Some claim this becomes most apparent in one scene where reverse-editing creates a compassionate bond between the saint and a leper. Close analysis, however, shows that cinematographic elements link Francis to God more than this counterpart. These elements pair him with a man for whom he feels compassion less than the God to whom he shows obedience. Ultimately, this scene’s humble style suggests the ways in which humility might be based less on compassion for others than obedience to God.

Keywords
Roberto Rossellini, The Flowers of St. Francis, St. Francis, humility, camera movement, Theology and Film

Author Notes
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This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/36
One of St. Francis of Assisi’s chief characteristics is his humbleness. His communion with lepers and sermons to birds are legendary because they demonstrate his ability to identify with the lowest of creatures. It comes as no surprise then that films representing the saint try to do so in ways as humble as the saint himself. Possibly the best example of one such film is Roberto Rossellini’s *The Flowers of St. Francis.*  

Critical responses to the film have noted parallels between Francis’s humble life and Rossellini’s style. For example, in one of the movie’s first reviews, Amos Vogel argued that the film’s “acting, camerawork and editing are intentionally humble.” Archer Weinstein’s 1950 review for the *N.Y. Post* agreed, claiming that the film displayed a style that was exceedingly “humble.” This trend established by initial critics has stuck with *Flowers* more than six decades later. In one analysis after another, scholars see a connection between the film’s form and its content, considering the way Rossellini uses humble style to represent a humble saint.

With this kind of reception, *Flowers* is ripe for an analysis in the field of Theology and Film because scholars in this discipline pay particular attention to how films make theological arguments through visual elements. They seek to add cinema as a legitimate medium for theological inquiry, suggesting that alongside scripture, sermons, and summas, film can provide ways to comprehend the mysteries of faith. Those working in this field propose that in addition to writers like Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther directors like Bresson, Buñuel, and
Rossellini make interesting assertions about Christian belief that are worth exploring. Whereas theologians made their claims with verbal speeches, essays, and books, directors employ visual editing, camera movement, and lighting.

But this prospect of using film as a new, contemporary, and visual medium for theological discourse has proven both promising and difficult for those in Theology and Film. While proclaiming to analyze the theological implications of film, few in this field actually analyze these movies as film. Most works in this discipline examine character, dialogue, and plot—narrative elements that lend themselves to literary analysis but fail to address the visual elements particular to cinema. Many have bemoaned this problem, challenging scholars in Theology and Film to actually analyze film as film, to go beyond narrative analysis to consider cinematographic analyses as well. The “visual humility” of Rossellini’s Flowers provides an excellent opportunity to do just that. To consider the text as one that suggests arguments about the nature of Christian humility through visual humility, this article seeks to closely analyze Flowers’s filmic qualities for their theological implications. More specifically, it examines the “leper scene,” the moment that best demonstrates Francis’s humility, and considers how things like editing, perspective, and camera movement comment on humbleness even while representing it. By analyzing the characteristics particular to film that address things in ways no other medium can, this essay...
argues that *The Flowers of St. Francis*’s visual humility challenges traditional notions of the Franciscan humility it depicts.

Before examining the link between Francis’s humbleness and Rossellini’s humble style, it is necessary to define the characteristics of this “humble style.” Perhaps the first would include its use of ordinary settings. Opulent studios used closed sets but Rossellini filmed on location, and, rather than striking scenery, *Flowers* features bland pastures. Throughout the film, no prairie looks different from the next, creating a monotonous landscape, but over time this flatness becomes soothing. Mary P. Wood suggests this much when she argues that this simple setting illustrates Rossellini’s politics. In *Italian Cinema*, she claims, “The spirituality or humanism which so many critics identify as a defining element of Rossellini’s work” is linked to the “sparseness of the sets of Francesco.”

Throughout *Flowers*, even setting creates a simplicity that appears more humble than the extravagant closed sets used for most films.

According to critics, a second characteristic of the film’s humble style is its use of humble costumes. Big producers would drape performers in elaborate attire, but Rossellini hired real monks and asked them to don the faded tunics they had worn for years. Professional actors would bear an arsenal of wardrobes, but *Flowers*’s amateur non-actors came to the set with little more than rags. Rossellini explained this choice by stating he chose these particular costumes because they “are so true to life that you scarcely notice them.”
draw attention to the protagonist with elaborate wardrobes, Rossellini used those that would have the opposite effect. The clothes appear tattered, their aesthetic value drained by asceticism. They drape their owners, letting only cracked hands, cold feet, and occasional faces peek through sleeves, shrouds, and hoods. In effect, these costumes hide characters, making them appear inhuman. In some shots, this wardrobe selection asks viewers to identify not with men but disembodied robes, haunted cloths that drift over the valleys. On its own, each robe appears dreary enough, but together each tunic resembles the next. As each robe replicates the last, they refuse to distinguish Francis from his friars. As the order skips through the fields, each human merges with the next into a herd of sackcloth. With this equalizing, something as simple as Rossellini’s decisions about costume refuse to exalt Francis and instead humble him into the background.

Thirdly, critics have claimed the film’s humble style appears in its use of cinematography. Throughout the film, Otello Martelli’s lens flattens perspective, and his long focus squeezes together foreground, midground, and background. Wide-angle would distance elements: close objects would appear much larger than distant ones. The director would invite protagonists to the exaggerated foreground, which would make them tower over secondary characters. In the Hollywood tradition, this simple choice of lens selection would venerate main characters over others, the setting, and the rest of the filmic world they inhabit;
but *Flowers* does the opposite, actually reducing spatial differences. Peter Brunette notes how objects in the film appear to occupy relatively similar space in the frame regardless of their distance from the camera. He claims the lens selection causes “pictorial flattening,” which eliminates perspective and equalizes everything in the frame.\(^7\) Because of this compression of planes, viewers of the film see sky, animals, and Francis as visually equal. According to Sandro Bernardi, this leveling makes all creation equally glorious and presents a worldview that sees “God in all the world.”\(^8\) In this way, the cinematography grants Francis no primacy, humbling the saint into the background, using lenses to place him on an equal visual plane and, implicitly, existential plane with the world around him.

With their treatment of location, costume, and lens choices, critics have implicitly defined the film’s “humble style” as one that refuses to grant its main character the kind of primacy seen in most films. Traditional cinema would shroud protagonists in elaborate sets, lavish costumes, and selective focus. These stylistic choices would thrust primary subjects into the foreground and denigrate everything else, but, in a film about a humble saint, Rossellini uses a humble style—an aesthetic that humbles the protagonist into the background. Using locations that make Francis seem bland, costumes that make the friar resemble his brothers, and lenses that flatten him into the same planes as dirt and grass and sky, Rossellini represents the saint as he would probably want to be represented—
without adornment, exaltation, or veneration. Therefore, one can define the film’s “visual humility” as a set of cinematographic devices that refuse to privilege the protagonist and, instead, make him equal with other visual elements.

If this is the case, if the film weds visual humility with Franciscan humility, if *The Flowers of St. Francis* shows how content and form can complement each other, it would be worth analyzing the film’s other visual elements to see the ways in which it enhances an understanding of St. Francis’s life and worldview. In other words, one can examine how the film’s visual humility implicitly comments on Franciscan humility. By visually representing the saint, Rossellini’s stylistic choices suggest assertions about Francis, and the director’s humble style can be read for theological arguments about the notion of humbleness itself.

I. Humility in Theology

To consider how this humble style compares to theological arguments regarding humbleness, it is important to examine the conceptual history that led to definitions of Franciscan humility. To do this, we can begin in the pre-Christian ancient world where “humility” emerged from the word *humus*, meaning soil, dirt, or the low. Greeks and Romans used the term pejoratively to signify ignorant, poor, and worthless people. They were suspicious of humility, arguing that it led to base, vile, and cowardly actions. But Judaism took an opposite view, and the
religion broke with philosophy, changing humility from a flaw to a force. The point of the oldest Hebrew text, the book of Job, is that the titular character learns his worthlessness. Stripped of wealth and health, he finds only God dependable, and his fortunes reverse only when he declares, “I am insignificant.”

This realization would devastate others, but it empowers Job. He learns that God sets “up on high those that be low,” and only when he is cast down will he be lifted up because God “shall save the humble person.”

The exaltation of humility seen in the Tanakh continues in the Gospels. When the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus calls a child forward and answers, “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Instructing disciples to sit at the feet of tables, Jesus proclaims that “whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” For emphasis, Jesus repeats these exact words in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, insisting the prayers of humble sinners ring louder than those of proud believers.

This humility remains important throughout Paul’s Epistles. In the kenosis passage, Paul summarizes the importance of Jesus as a model of self-emptying, writing that Christ, “being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the
form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.”¹⁶ For Paul, God becomes man in order to humble himself.

Following the example of Christ, early theologians advocated humility. When philosophers showed contempt for the body and pride for the spirit, Augustine affirmed the flesh and attacked pride, exalting Christ’s physical existence as *humilitas*. Glorifying Jesus, he claimed “the word made flesh” receives glory because “Christ is humble.”¹⁷ Philosophers prided themselves on superior knowledge, but Augustine insisted only “devout humility makes the mind subject to what is superior.”¹⁸ Humility is primary in Aquinas’s thinking as well. He claims all virtues come from grace, but people can only receive it through humility. If anyone wishes to overcome selfishness and accept God, he or she must first become humble. According to Aquinas, humility alone “makes man submissive and ever open to receive the influx of Divine grace.”¹⁹ Therefore, he concludes that humility is the root of all righteousness.

This emphasis on humility also appears in writings about St. Francis. In one such story, he heals a leper, thanks God and immediately retreats from the province because “through humility he desired to flee all vainglory.”²⁰ In another, St. Francis remains humble by parading himself through a village bound to a cart like a donkey. In a third, he humbles himself by eating from a leper’s dish.²¹ From Job to Jesus, Paul to Augustine, and Aquinas to Francis, humility has largely been synonymous with modesty. Job learns to be modest before God, and
Jesus teaches his disciples to esteem others higher than themselves. Paul claims Christ saved humanity by purging himself of arrogance, and, according to Augustine and Aquinas, humans can receive salvation only by similarly expelling haughtiness from their lives. In the stories about Francis, the saint demonstrates this modesty, implementing the selflessness of Christ in order to extend love to the poor and sick. Given this conceptual history, it would appear that most define humility as the quality or condition of being modest.

II. Visual Humility in The Flowers of St. Francis

Having covered these definitions, we can now explore the film’s treatment of humility. As noted above, scholars of the film have suggested an affinity between Francis’s life of humility and Rossellini’s visual humility, but to more fully explore how the relationship between the film’s form and its content suggests theological implications, a close, frame-by-frame reading of the film may be required.

Perhaps the best scene for such analysis would be one commonly referred to as the leper scene. The most celebrated chapter of the film, “How Francis, praying one night in the woods, met the leper” has drawn the most scholarly attention. Many considering how the film might demonstrate “humble style” point to this moment of Franciscan humility. In it, the saint prays quietly in the woods, asking God to show him how to demonstrate heavenly love to others. As
if in reply, the Lord sends a leper afflicted with weeping sores. Instead of recoiling out of repulsion, the saint draws near to the wretch, takes his hand, and tries to embrace him. When the leper pulls away, Francis is tempted to surrender, to flee back into his prayer, but the saint humbly answers the rebuff with persistence, catching up to the diseased man and kissing his neck. Stunned by this act of meekness, the leper stumbles back into the night but not before looking back, clearly touched and somehow changed.

With such content, the scene becomes the crown jewel of the film’s “humble style.” According to Joseph Cunneen, this moment is one of the few that satisfies viewers’ desires to see the saint represented as saintly precisely because it shows Francis’s compassionate humility. He estimates that for most this “brief, wordless scene in which [Francis] meets a leper in the woods is apt to remain in their imagination.”22 In addition to representing Francis at his most humble, the scene also best demonstrates Rossellini’s humble style. Peter Doebler claims this much when he argues that the director’s aesthetic finds its clearest articulation in this encounter.23

To a certain extent, this scene has attracted so much attention, so much critical insistence that it best represents Francis’s humility and Rossellini’s visual humility, because it displays the saint’s compassion. Representing popular opinion, Martin Scorsese calls the leper scene “the greatest moment in the film.”24 According to him, the saint embraces the contagious man, because Francis feels
“the suffering of another human being so completely that he allows it to enter into him and inhabit his own soul.” Because of this, Scorsese argues that the scene shows “compassion at its most terrifyingly direct.” This interpretation leads him to conclude that there may be no other film in all of the history of cinema that “deals with the basic question of compassion so eloquently.”

Some echo this interpretation, suggesting the leper scene’s editing reflects Francis’s humility by representing his compassion. Most of these interpretations arrive at such conclusions based on reverse-editing. In these conversations, reverse-editing is defined as a trio of shots: the first depicts a character looking, the second shows what the character sees, and the third shows the character reacting to what he has seen. These kinds of triads create a relationship between the character and the object he sees. According to Brunello Rondi, Italian cinema has a long tradition of using this kind of editing to represent awakening. Such films feature sequences that oscillate between shots of characters and what they see, and cuts between these images become increasingly rapid to depict internal growth.25 As shots cut back and forth between viewer and viewed faster and faster, reverse-editing begins to merge the two. For Rondi, this merging suggests burgeoning compassion; the subject becomes one with the object he gazes upon. In the leper scene, editing, Rondi claims, links Francis with his perspective of the leper. Together, such shots merge the saint and the wretch, representing the
former’s growing empathy for the latter. In this regard, Rondi suggests the scene depicts how Francis learns to humble himself by showing the leper compassion.

Others claim the scene’s reverse-editing represents Francis’s compassion not just for the leper but for the entire world. Bernardi argues that, in this scene, Francis prays to God, but hears no answer. The saint evokes God but his “point-of-view shot shows the tops of the trees and the sky, nothing else.” Bernardi claims Francis’s “subject-gaze” of the empty firmament suggests an unanswered prayer, and once the saint finds indifference from the heavens he seeks reply from the earth. Bernardi claims that once Francis does this, reverse-editing links him “to the sun, the earth, the water,” and these points of view suggest the saint finds holiness in “the plant, the pig, the leper.” Therefore, Bernardi concludes that the scene’s editing represents how Francis discovers the “sacredness of the common world.” If this is the case, the scene represents how the saint begins to regard not just the leper but all of existence with compassion.

A third interpretation claims the scene foregrounds humility not by using reverse-editing but by rejecting it altogether. For example, Alan Millen argues that this sequence contains no counter-shots at all. In “Francis God’s Jester,” he claims that the episode contains “no close shots and reverse shots which would establish subjective ‘points of view’ for Francis and the leper.” He notes how the scene’s tangled web of frames and jumbled net of editing confuse perspective. According to him, shots appear without being tied back to another character’s
view, offering many trios of shots without the traditional character-view-reaction triad that would formally constitute reverse-editing. Millen claims that without this convention, the sequence also passes “without any appeal to Francis’s individual subjectivity.” Others argue that the film emphasizes reverse-editing to demonstrate Francis’s humble subjectivity, showing the ways in which he overcomes his individual subjectivity to develop a relational intersubjectivity with the leper he sees. Millen takes an alternate route, arguing that the scene displays visual humility not by using reverse-editing to show Francis’s ego-transcending relationship with the leper but by rejecting reverse-editing to deprive Francis of any ego-establishing perspective in the first place. In his thinking, the form of the scene replicates the saint’s humbleness with editing that refuses to privilege Francis’s point of view, to deny him and viewers the traditional luxury of a single perspective.

Given these interpretations, it would seem that while theological history defines humility as the quality or condition of being modest, responses to the film have defined it as the quality or condition of being compassionate. Critics have gravitated not to a scene that shows Francis’s modest assessment of himself as much as a scene that shows him demonstrating compassionate love to another. Obviously, scholars of this film read a very specific scene in very different ways, but, despite their differences, they all suggest that this scene and its use of perspective demonstrate the core of both the film’s visual humility and its implicit
arguments about Franciscan humility. If viewers wish to consider how the film uses visuals to make a theological argument regarding the humbleness it depicts, the concentrated disagreement between Rondi, Bernardi, and Millen suggests this scene is the place to start. To further examine this suggestion requires a closer investigation of the leper scene, and to answer the call of scholars in Theology and Film that look for cinematographic analyses, this investigation requires a close reading of Francis’s encounter with the leper. Although only five minutes and twenty-eight shots long, this dense scene provides many answers regarding the relationship between Franciscan humility and Rossellini’s humble style.

III. Analysis of the Leper Scene

The scene opens on a darkened valley. A close-up reveals Francis lying face down in the grass, crying, “My Lord and my all.” A wide shot establishes the countryside before a second close-up thrusts viewers back upon Francis weeping, “My God nailed on the cross. To love you in the company of my brothers. Nailed to the cross. My God.” More than a prayer, this is an evocation. Francis’s repetition of “My God” begs God to appear. Despite this request, the clouds do not part and the heavens do not open. Instead, a lone bell replies, clanging in the distant night. Confused, Francis furrows his brow and rises before peering into the shadows.
The leper full of oozing sores and puss-stained rags emerges from the bushes and crosses the frame. Suddenly, the camera springs to life as it pans along with him (Fig. 1). Doing so, the camera’s movement suggests the movement of a diegetic viewer. Presumably, the camera replicates the sight of Francis who is somewhere off-screen panning his head to follow the leper, but this valid assumption is undermined by the next shot, one in which Francis stands in the bushes and also turns his head (Fig. 2). In this way, his head pan repeats the camera pan. While it seems to imply a reverse-edit, this shot denies one. Reverse-shots suggest simultaneity: the camera would show the subject looking ahead, cut to the object he sees, and cut back to the subject still looking ahead. Traditional reverse-edits imply that the subject and the camera look at the same thing at the same time. This synchronicity requires the subject’s eyes remain still while the camera remains still, but in this trio of shots the camera pans before Francis does. The camera does not turn simultaneously with Francis’s head, and the shot of the former precedes the shot of the latter by nearly ten seconds. This asynchrony proves these shots are not a reverse-edit but a repetition, and this disjunction that disrupts traditional editing proves that the shot of the leper is not Francis’s point of view. If this is the case, this puzzling edit replicates not Francis’s sight but his puzzled state of mind. While it seems needlessly complicated, this unusual edit sets the scene’s tone brilliantly. As the saint stumbles through the dark forest, lurching over brush and briar in attempts to find
the leper he can hear but cannot see, these nontraditional edits represent the saint’s confusion by employing confusingly repetitive camera pans.

From the outset, even by these few seconds into the scene, this unusual editing style disrupts conventional perspectives. Usually triads of shot, counter-shot, and reaction-shot establish character point of view and work to position viewers within the film, but with this repetitive pan and disjointed editing, positionality comes unhinged. Here, editing refuses to establish Francis’s point-of-view, and because this sequence rejects traditional edits that would establish his perspective, it would seem that Millen is right, that without reverse-editing this sequence refuses to appeal to the saint’s individual subjectivity. Given that this confusing refusal seems to replicate the saint’s confusion, it would also seem that such editing suggests something about compassion. As the saint desperately seeks the leper he cannot find, scrounging through the woods to show him God’s love, the audience winnows through the tangle of shots, trying to find Francis’s viewpoint. As Millen suggests, this rejection of perspectival shots creates its own
sense of humility. Humbling the saint with confusion, this editing also causes viewers to experience that humbling confusion firsthand.

While this initial encounter between Francis and the leper seem to validate Millen’s claims that the scene demonstrates humble style by using editing to deny the saint any individual subjectivity, the moments that follow it also complicate his argument with a perspectival shot. As he searches for the leper, Francis continues scurrying through the forest, following the clanging bell. Passing through one darkened veil after another, he is mocked by the sound, and, unable to visually locate the clanging, the saint stops, collects himself, and turns his sights towards the sky (Fig. 3). The next shot shows the darkened heavens, still, serene, and encompassing the entire frame (Fig. 4). The next shot cuts back to Francis still looking above and smiling (Fig. 5). Because it contains a shot, counter-shot, and reaction shot, this trio of edits complicates Millen’s claims. This shot of the sky would be meaningless in this frame if not motivated by the protagonist, so it is safe to assume that the shot of the sky constitutes Francis’s perspective. The fact that this shot is sandwiched between two others of the saint gazing upward only bolsters this interpretation. Then the scene contains at least one shot of Francis’s subjective point of view, and, if this is the case, it complicates our ability to argue the sequence entirely shirks subjectivity. A reading of humility in the scene might favor an analysis that renounces all individual perspective: editing deprives all characters of all subjectivity, forcing
them to submit to a godlike force that motivates camera cuts alone. Such editing
would seem to fit with humility: the saint rejects all subjectivity, and editing does
the same. The existence of the scene’s one point-of-view shot, however,
complicates this conclusion.

Figure 3 establishes the shot where Francis looks at the sky. Figure 4 sets up the counter-shot,
which is Francis’s perspective of the sky. Figure 5 shows the reaction shot of Francis smiling at
the sky.

This perspectival shot of the sky would seem to prove Bernardi’s claims
that the scene uses reverse-editing to show Francis’s compassion with all of
existence. As he claims, placing shots of the protagonist alongside those of nature
suggest that the former experiences a growing affinity with the latter. On a visual
level, editing pairs the two entities, suggesting that Francis humbles himself by
increasingly identifying with the world around him. In this cinematographic
universe, the titular character becomes no more important than, as Bernardi noted,
sky, trees, and the rest of creation. It would seem Bernardi is correct, that this
moment of visual humility shows Francis’s compassion for the entire world.

But this visual exchange between Francis and nature also challenges these
claims. Bernardi argues that in the scene Francis feels compassion for creation
because he feels rejection from the Creator. He asserts that the scene unleashes a
torrent of reverse-edits linking the saint to his physical surroundings because God
refuses to answer his prayers, but the perspectival shot of the sky suggests the
opposite. If Francis’s prayers went unanswered he would be devastated, but he is
not. He smiles, looking to the heavens happily. Bernardi is correct to state that
this “point-of-view shot shows the tops of the trees and the sky, nothing else.”
But it seems incorrect to imply that Francis sees nothing else, because, after this
shot concludes, Francis’s smile remains in the reaction shot, suggesting that he
has seen something other than evergreens and clouds. Bernardi argues that
Francis finds God unforthcoming and seeks reply on earth, looking on the whole
world with compassion. He suggests that Francis feels this compassion because
he does not find God in the sky, but the smile on the saint’s face suggests he does
find God there and hears some reassuring, encouraging, smile-inducing answer.

Whatever answer Francis hears emboldens him to find out, pursue, and
embrace the leper in ways that seem to prove Rondi correct. The rest of the scene
features the saint’s frantic search for the wretch, and his sole motivation becomes
embracing the man. This fact is replicated by the editing, a dizzying display of
tangled shots that show Francis facing, turned away from, and in profile to the
camera as he ducks through bushes, scampers across the prairie, and falls in a
field all in pursuit of a leper who retreats from him. Shots of Francis are coupled
with shots of the diseased man in ways that place them in conversation, seemingly
linking them, as Rondi suggests, in sympathetic bonds, but the two are not linked
with direct shot-reverse-shot editing. Actually, a majority of the scene features these characters failing to see each other. The saint hears the leper’s bell but cannot find him, and the leper hears someone in the woods and tries to hide. When they finally happen to occupy each other’s gaze, it occurs within the same shot—most explicitly in a series of tracking shots featuring the leper marching ahead in profile before Francis catches up to him, alongside him, in the same frame. But in moments of editing, in moments where the kind of perspectival shots that Rondi claims bind the two should occur, none do. In fact, the scene goes out of its way to show that they do not appear in each other’s perspective.

The ways in which editing decouple these characters happens most blatantly in the closing frames of the film. After the two have embraced, the leper is clearly overcome. Although he presses into the prairie silently, he repeatedly stops and looks at the lone man who has shown him compassion. During the leper’s slow retreat, long takes accentuate the absence of reverse-editing. At one point, a static camera shows a straight-on shot of the leper’s back. He trudges into the field. His bell clangs slowly. Nevertheless, the camera holds for one of the sequence’s longest takes. Just when rhythm invites a cut, the leper turns back. Just as viewer attention wears thin, a cut would arrive; the leper’s gaze must be answered by a reverse-edit to Francis’s. But none responds. The leper merely looks. Editing offers no clue regarding the object of his gaze. Anticipation lingers, heightens, and remains unresolved before he simply turns back again and
heads towards the field. The long take lengthens even more as he presses onward into the lonely prairie, away from the camera, audience, and his only friend.

When editing finally replies with a shot of Francis, it is one that still disconnects these characters. The leper has turned away and resumed walking into the night, so the view of Francis cannot belong to him. Furthermore, the shot of Francis shows him slumping to the ground, weeping and praying, “My God! My Lord and my all!” He buries his face and, therefore, vision into the earth, which severs his viewpoint from the leper. Mid-prayer, the camera cuts to the leper, farther away, deeper in the field, and his cowbell clangs as he abandons the saint. The camera stays on the leper, but through voice-over Francis moans, “O great God!” This juxtaposition of sight and sound ties the saint’s prayer to the leper. The scene began with the saint calling out, “My Lord and my all.” His answer: an approaching leper’s bell. The sequence ends with the evocation, “O great God!” What replies? A leper receding into night. Placing visual and audio elements together in this way connects the two, as if Francis’s “great God” appears in the form of the leper. In subtitled versions of the film, this suggestion is heightened by the fact that the words “O great God!” appear on the screen beneath the leper like a kind of caption that seems to label, title, and even name him as Francis’s deity. These closing shots disprove Rondi’s claim that reverse-editing makes these characters the object of each other’s gazes. The editing disconnects these characters, positioning the leper so he gazes into the horizon,
Francis so he stares into dirt, and both so they fail to see each other. The conversation between shots of them is not a perspectival one that constitutes the viewpoint of Francis. This fact challenges Rondi’s claims about Francis’s growing compassion for the leper precisely because they hinged on the assumption that the scene featured the saint’s viewpoint of wretch.

Initial shots used editing to link Francis and the heavens, but the closing shot bookends this feature, using camera movement to further connect the saint and his god. In the final shot, the camera cuts back to Francis as he continues weeping facedown in the flowers prostrate and praying like he was in the beginning of the scene (Fig. 6). As he drives his howling face deeper into the field, the camera pans upward past the saint, field, and horizon, past the clouds, panning higher until it finally rests on the sky (Fig. 7 to Fig. 8). Doing so, the camera breaks from Francis. No longer hinged to him, it turns to the heavens independent of him. Therefore, the last shot of the sequence mirrors the shot where he looked to the sky, it looked back, and he smiled, affirmed by whatever he saw there. In the last shot of the scene, however, Francis looks to the ground, and the camera refuses to cut. It pans without Francis’s view, and no reverse-edit follows with Francis smiling. In the scene’s second shot of the sky, the saint fails to see heaven’s affirmation. Nevertheless, the panning camera suggests that affirmation remains there to be seen. As he looks at the ground, no reverse-edit can show a view of the heavens, but the impossibility of a point-of-view shot does
not disconnect Francis from the firmament. Instead of a reverse-edit, a pan connects the two, suggesting that all Francis must do to smile once more is see what the panning camera sees by turning his eyes towards the sky to find his great God.

Figure 6: Camera views Francis. Figure 7: Camera pans up. Figure 8: Camera views sky.

Conclusion

If—as Rondi, Bernardi, Millen, and this article assert—this scene demonstrates Rossellini’s humble style and within its use of visual elements rests the film’s position on the nature of humility, what does this analysis suggest? If editing disconnects Francis from the leper but links him to the sky and that fact is reinforced with the startling camera pan that visually links the saint to God in the scene’s final shot, what theological conclusions can we draw regarding The Flowers of St. Francis’s take on humbleness? Before answering these questions and linking the film’s style to theological implications, it might be beneficial to take one final detour, revisiting theological arguments about humility to see what new light they may shed on the film’s representation of it.
In “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’: For and Against Humility,” Mark Button claims that, like much of the Christian tradition, contemporary notions of humility emphasize modesty. In the modern world, the humble are those like Job, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, and Francis who appear not to esteem themselves higher than others, but humility has traditionally also been “an essential spiritual quality that prepares the righteous believer to stand in an appropriate relationship of awe, obedience, and worship to a creator God.”

Contemporary Christians often associate humbleness with modesty in the face of peers, but from biblical figures to theologians to Rossellini, it has also meant submission before the almighty. In an increasingly humanistic society, even the church’s take on humility has centered on relationships between people, but in the past being humble pivoted on the relationship between the individual and God. If they must, most would seem comfortable humbling themselves through the more inviting avenues of compassion, love, and politeness, but Christian humility requires less pleasing aspects like discipline, submission, and obedience.

Contemporary notions about Franciscan humility have been distorted as well. In St. Francis of Assisi: His Life and Writings as Recorded by his Contemporaries, Leo Sherley Price claims that Francis ranks among the most popular saints. For centuries, the faithful have been attracted to his charm, serenity, and compassion, but Price insists that “these admirable qualities should never be viewed through a cloud of sentimentality or regarded as the sum of his
life and message.”

True, Francis’s humility was fueled by the compassion so quickly recognized by followers of the saint as well as fans of this film, but Price argues that Francis’s love for others stemmed from and was secondary to his “love of God.” Furthermore, the God that Francis loved was not necessarily the comforting, kind, and compassionate one that contemporaries assume him to be. Francis’s Lord was a dominating deity that demanded absolute surrender, and the love Francis felt for that “Master” inspired the saint not to become more comforting, kind, or compassionate as much as become “a true servant.”

Most appreciate the saint’s “courteous service of all men,” but few embrace “his hidden life of prayer, penance, and self-discipline.” In other words, when recognizing Francis’s humility, most foreground his heartwarming compassion towards others while he would foreground his cold obedience to God.

Francis himself links his humility to obedience many times in the *Fioretti*. One section titled “On the Perfection of Holy Humility and Obedience in Blessed Francis and His Friars” does not feature kind actions towards others. Instead, he strives to “preserve the virtue of holy humility” by resigning the chief office of the order he founded. He gathers his followers to tell them that he, their leader, will now follow as well. He says, “I am now as though dead to you. Look to Peter Cantanni, whom you and I will all obey.” Then, he falls to his knees before the man and swears lifelong obedience. Even stories that place Francis alongside lepers have less to do with his compassion for them than the godly
obedience that serving them could produce. For example, “How, in order to establish humility, he wished all the friars to serve lepers” tells how Francis required everyone who entered his order to serve lepers. He institutes this rule to inspire “holy humility,” but this divine humbleness did not focus on showing the sick compassion. Instead, it was designed to force would-be Franciscans to prove their ability to submit to authority. According to Price, few humanitarians, Christians, or amateur Franciscans acknowledge this fact, and the many who are comfortable with showing contagious lepers compassion might be less comfortable showing a holy God obedience.

To see the eagerness with which people recognize humility based on compassion rather than obedience one need look no further than scholarship on Rossellini’s *The Flowers of St. Francis*. Scholars have most commented on the leper scene because they suggest it best demonstrates the film’s humble style, but many also assume this sequence depicts humble compassion. Few comment on the film’s many other scenes that blatantly demonstrate Franciscan humble obedience. In one such scene, the monks scamper home in a rainstorm. They come upon their hut only to find it occupied by a donkey and its rider. The man refuses to share the hut, calling them vile thieves. They respond by being “lambs of the good Lord” and stepping back into the rain. In the wet and cold, Francis urges them to rejoice for “it’s the first time providence has made [them] useful to others.” Beside the ruins of a church, Francis beholds his brethren huddling and
shivering in the weather at his command and begins to weep. When asked why, he answers, “May God forgive me for taking advantage of your obedience.” Then he instructs Brother Bernardo, “I command you to do what I ask in holy obedience… I command you to punish me for my arrogance. As I lay flat on the ground, place one foot on my mouth and the other on my neck, and moving your weight back and forth three times, repeat, ‘Lie there, wretch, son of Pietro Bernardone. Whence this arrogance that imposes on your companions such severe penance?’” This neck-stomping scene demonstrates Francis’s humility just as well as the leper-kissing one. But where are its admirers? Where are claims that this scene will remain in viewers’ imagination? Where are those who claim this moment is one in which the saint is more clearly expressed? Where is even a single one to call this the greatest moment in the film?

Perhaps this scene garners few fans because the humility demonstrated here has no human object. Francis commands the monk to step on his neck so he may show humility to God, but how can film show the God to which he shows this humility? How much easier it becomes when that object of humility is another human, especially when that human is an outcast forsaken by all others. The saint embraces the leper and audiences weep because both the subject and object of humility appear on the screen. Compassion becomes the most demonstrable expression of the saint’s humility because it can be captured most
easily on the screen in the visual medium of film—we can actually see the saint embracing the leper.

More difficult is cinematically representing moments of humility demonstrated through obedience to God. An art house film of *Flower*’s caliber does not stoop so low as to anthropomorphize God, and a neo-realist director of Rossellini’s integrity avoids representing the Lord in human form. He remains true to Christian tradition that regards God as both omnipresent and invisible, but the Almighty’s invisibility poses complications in a visual medium like film. Unable to see God on the screen, viewers inevitably focus on what they can see. In the leper scene, they cannot see God, so they assume the leper they can visualize must be the ultimate object of Francis’s compassion.

Nevertheless, even in this leper scene, visual elements suggest the presence of an invisible God. This article claims that in kissing the leper, Francis humbles himself not to the leper but to God. In ways compatible with modern tastes, most assume this scene demonstrates humbleness based on love, kindness, and sympathy, but this scene also maintains God as the object of this humble act. Shots of the sky feature the invisible object of Francis’s humility, not a leper in the night that he compassionately embraces, but the God in the sky for whom he obediently embraces the leper. In the scene’s truest point-of-view shot, Francis sees something we do not; he looks at God and smiles. But in the scene’s closing pan, we see something Francis does not. He weeps into the ground as we see the
sky. There, with this camera movement, the gaze reverses. God looks down at his obedient son and smiles upon his humility.

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3 Ibid., 1.

4 For example, some who call for less narrative and more visual analyses when it comes to theology and film include Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Steve Nolan, “Understanding Films: Reading in the Gaps,” *Flickering Images: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, eds. Anthony J. Clarke and Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2005); and Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008). For strong examples of texts that achieve this strict analysis of the vision to explore the ways in which filmic qualities link to theological ones, see Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (Berkeley: U of California, 1972) and Joseph Cunneen, *Robert Bresson: A Spiritual Style in Film* (London: Continuum, 2004). While neither of these examples analyzes *The Flowers of St. Francis*, both of them provide informative examples of what cinematographic analyses of movies can look like and perhaps should look like in the field of Theology and Film.


10 Job 40:4 (KJV).

11 Job 5:11 (KJV).

12 Job 22:29 (KJV).
13 Matthew 18:4 (KJV).
16 Philippians 2:6-7 (KJV).
18 Ibid., 572.
27 Ibid., 57.
28 Ibid., 57.
29 Ibid., 57.
31 Ibid., 90.
32 Mark Button, “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’ For and Against Humility,” Political Theory 33, no. 6 (December 2005), 842.

33 Price, 5.

34 Ibid., 5.

35 Ibid., 5.

36 Ibid., 5.

37 Ibid., 53.

38 Ibid., 57.

References


Button, Mark. “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’ For and Against Humility.” Political Theory 33, no. 6 (December 2005): 840-868.


