

Understanding Franciscan Theology Tradition and Spirituality

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Part 1 – Understanding Franciscan Theology, Tradition & Spirituality

In order to better understand the different focus of the two main theologies in the Catholic Church, we need to understand or at least revisit the primary theology that is taught and is the basis for our religious education programs.

The following diagram, though much simplified, can aid in setting us on our basic path to understanding. We will look at the Two (2) main theologies from the Middle Ages: the Primary Theology adopted by the Church (i.e. The Work of the Dominican School) and the Alternate Theology in the Church, (i.e. The Franciscan School).

I am not here speaking of Spiritualities, of which there are many fine paths that can lead us to experience God. I am speaking only of the foundations in theology that give rise to the many varied and equally excellent approaches to God (spiritualities).

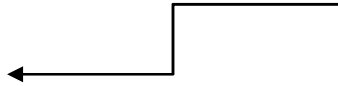
As with all Orders, we have much in our development that is based in the insights and writings of both St. Augustine and St. Anselm. So to help us understand the different focus that has become the foundations of the basic spiritualities accepted in the Church, we need to look at these 2 major schools of thought, The “Dominican” School and the “Franciscan” School.

Lets begin with the chart on the next page for our discussion.

St. Augustine



St. Anselm & the Doctrine of Atonement



Thomas Aquinas (Dominican School – The Primary Theology)

- atonement centered
- Jesus seen as expiation for sin
- Jesus – Incarnation would not have been necessary if Adam & Eve had not sinned
- Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* 1879 made this school the primary theology taught in all Catholic schools of religion and theology.
- Primary theology in the Church
- Juridical or law based (Commandments, laws, rules)

Western (Latin) Fathers

St. Augustine

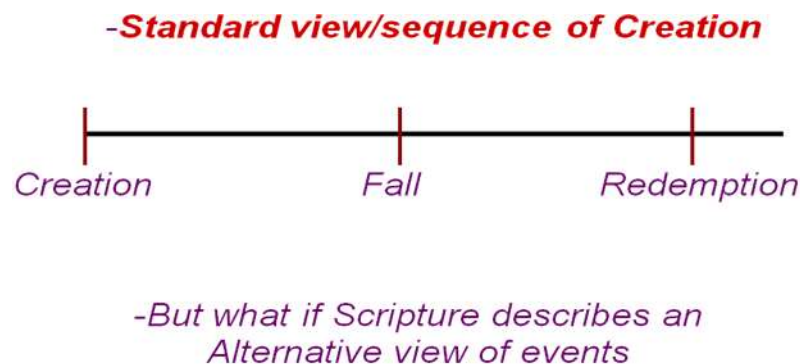
- Though much of St Augustine's writing is based on seeing God as love, he still had an emphasis on the fall of man characterized by Original Sin – this foundation places our focus on the sin of Adam and Eve (pride, disobedience, possibly trying to take by force (fruit of the forbidden tree), that which cannot be taken or earned, but which can only be given). None the less, with original sin predominant we develop a spirituality based on our need for redemption, penance and restitution. The love of God is very much present, especially for Augustine, but it is still viewed in light of the fall.

St. Anselm

- Doctrine of Atonement – Middle ages – this doctrine was developed to reconcile the love of God and His forgiveness with the human need for retribution or atonement. It is an answer to cheap grace or a God too loving and gracious to desire punishment. Sin can be

forgiven through the love and mercy of God, but it must be atoned for through penance and punishment. Investigate the writing *“Cur Deus Homo”* or Why the God Man.

This Western (Latin) theology was championed by St Thomas Aquinas and became identified as the Dominican School, and might have a view of creation as depicted below. (Again remember this is much simplified to emphasize the basic foundational difference in approach to God. There is much in the various theologies that overlap in many areas and all are directed to the same goal of unity with God)



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Figure 1 - basic view of creation

This brief diagram is to highlight what we generally understand as the sequence of Creation, taken from Genesis. Creation is the beginning of God's wondrous activity. As we know also from Genesis, it seems that sin and the fall from grace along with expulsion from the Garden of Eden, follow hot on the heels of God's work. As we sing in the exultat every Easter vigil, O wondrous fault, that earned us so great a redeemer.

But as the diagram suggests, what if there is an alternate view of how these events unfolded? There is the possibility of a different understanding of God's plan that will find some voice among the Eastern (Greek) Fathers and will later become the foundation for the Franciscan School and its understanding of God's plan for creation.

Comparison of Schools of Theology

<p>The Western or Latin Fathers</p> <p><i>Saint Augustine</i> <i>Saint Anselm of Canterbury</i> <i>"Cur Deus Homo"</i> <i>Doctrine of Salvation</i></p> <p>The Dominican School Thomas Aquinas</p> <p>Jesus comes (Incarnation) as atonement and expiation for sin</p> <p>without sin – Incarnation was unnecessary</p> <p>redemption and salvation centered</p> <p>atoning for personal sins</p> <p>This path became the Primary theology of the Church</p> <p>Pope Leo XIII (SFO) – <i>"Aeterni Patris"</i> 1879 More judicially based on rules & moral codes</p>	<p>The Eastern or Greek Fathers <i>(Cappodocians)</i> <i>Athanasius, Basil the Great</i> <i>Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus</i> <i>Pseudo-Dionysius</i> <i>The Victorines</i> Rupert of Deutz (Benedictine) Robert Grosseteste The penitential movement in the Church</p> <p>The Franciscan School Bonaventure of Bagnorigio John Duns Scotus</p> <p>Jesus comes (Incarnation) because this was always God's desire and intention</p> <p>Incarnation was never dictated by any need of man, but by God's free desire</p> <p>God is the ultimate Good = Love Love is the reason for creation</p> <p>redemption and salvation are the result of God's love</p> <p>conforming oneself to Jesus in radical sonship</p> <p>This path toward humility & poverty remains as an alternate & accepted theology</p> <p>Based on the gift of the Father's love</p>
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Figure 2 - Alternate (Franciscan) Tradition

Franciscan Tradition (alternate theology)

The theology of the Franciscan School develops from an insight of the Eastern Fathers, namely that the Incarnation is too important and too great an event to be initiated by sin. This insight stimulates a new understanding and hopefully an appreciation of the fullness of God's love for creation.

Pseudo-Dionysius & later the Victorines developed the understanding of God as goodness, and the ultimate good is love. And this goodness is self diffusive or is constantly being given to others.

Rupert of Deutz (a Benedictine) around 1127 was possibly the first to articulate the idea that since God was good and therefore could not will evil, then the Incarnation was fore-ordained so that God could be present and rejoice with His people. The Cross was the result of man's fall, but the Incarnation was not.

Later, in the 1230s, Robert Grosseteste, (secular clergyman and later bishop), a noted Scripture scholar at Oxford, came up with an original theological conception quite appropriate for a natural scientist. He believed that the whole universe reflected the glory of God. It was a great educational machine, meant for the instruction of humanity.

For Grosseteste, Christ's incarnation was not a last-minute rescue plan devised to rescue fallen humanity. It was part of the plan from the beginning. Christ, God incarnated in man, had always been meant to be the capstone of creation. This teaching resonated with the Franciscans at Oxford, where Robert taught theology to the new friars.

The writings and thoughts of both Rupert and Robert would eventually come to the fore in the work of Bl. John Duns Scotus OFM and would form the basis of thought for the theology of the Franciscan School.

Jesus was not an after-thought that happened because mankind did not keep our part of the covenant with God. Sin was not the reason for Jesus, and nothing man could have ever done could force God to act. The Incarnation was **not a reaction, but the initial action** that caused creation in the first place. In other words, the Incarnation was not God's "plan B" set into motion after "plan A" failed.

God always intended Incarnation before and regardless of the existence of man or any of his subsequent (to creation) actions.

In the Franciscan vision, creation might look more like this: all creation begins with Jesus, who is the blueprint for creation and is the ultimate goal of creation.



Franciscan view of creation

- based on Jesus always being the blueprint and basis of creation. It was always God's intention in the fullness of time to Incarnate
- Jesus the Master Plan - **Ephesians 1: 4**
- First born of Creation – **Colossians 1:15-18**
- Pre-existent Word- Logos – **John 1**
- Center, focus, reason for creation -
- goal of creation - **All things created through, for Him & have their goal/fullness in Him - Colossians 1:15-18**

Figure 3 - Franciscan sequence of Creation

Now with the possibility of a new starting point different from the traditional one of the first sin, we can look into the events beginning with the life of St. Francis, the inspiration of St. Clare and the wisdom of St Bonaventure and Bl. John Scotus that moves sin out of the forefront and replaces it with overwhelming love of a Creator overjoyed and passionately in love with creation.

Francis of Assisi – vernacular theologian

Though not formally educated in theology, Francis through gift and experience was able to articulate the loving presence of God in a way understandable to the poor and unlettered masses, those relegated to second class places by both church and secular institutions.

The foundation stones for Franciscan theology, spirituality and life are based in the **humility and poverty** of God. This poverty is known as kenosis, or God's total giving/self-emptying to be born into the human condition. God freely chose to become human to rejoice in creation.

In Jesus, God the Father expresses utter humility in His turning completely in love to Jesus and through Jesus, to us.

Francis in his Canticle of the Creatures expresses his understanding of this poverty and humility, turned in love toward creation and goes on to declare that God alone is good and

worthy, while man in his exalted position (within the created and ordered world) is little more than a worm compared to the greatness of God. In all this Francis is humbled and in awe of God, who despite all His majesty, desires us and stoops down low in love for us, a love that surpasses and covers everything.

The Franciscan path is a Spirituality of descent, a way of becoming little and a way to imitate the humility and poverty of God.

Taken to its conclusion, the Franciscan view is that in ourselves, we can never be worthy and earn our salvation. “Only God is good”. There is only one way in our grasp and that is a simple “yes” to accept God’s love as a pure gift and to live life reflecting that love, (yes it is a sacramental vision of life).

God desires us, to be in a deeply loving relationship with us and constantly invites us and offers us opportunities to enter into relationship. On our part, we will still need to make a fundamental option to either accept God’s invitation or to reject it. As God through His free will has chosen us, we too, in our free will, must choose Him.

Before going on to Bonaventure and Scotus and a brief look at their contributions to our Franciscan traditions, let pause and review the foundations of Franciscan life and spirituality.

Two Key beliefs as foundation of Franciscan Life & Spirituality

- **Poverty of God** – Perfect love requires the lover to hold nothing back from the beloved! God freely, by choice empties Himself for the good of the other (self-communication -- kenosis)
- **Humility of God** – God turns toward Jesus completely (God’s full self-expression in one other than Himself) and through Jesus The Father turns toward us (finite self-expression of Jesus) and all creation.
- Our poverty & humility is based on our understanding and embracing our absolute dependence upon God for existence and our need for otherness (relationships)

Figure 4 - Foundations of Franciscan Spiritual Tradition

Think about what these 2 statements say to you about the nature of our God, and what challenges do they ask of you?

St. Bonaventure

Bonaventure ([Italian](#): *San Bonaventura*; 1221^[1] – 15 July 1274), born **John of Fidanza** ([Italian](#): *Giovanni di Fidanza*), was an Italian [medieval scholastic theologian](#) and [philosopher](#), the eighth [Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor](#). He was a [Cardinal Bishop of Albano](#). He was [canonized](#) on 14 April 1482 by [Pope Sixtus IV](#) and declared a [Doctor of the Church](#) in the year 1588 by [Pope Sixtus V](#). He is known as the "*Seraphic Doctor*" ([Latin](#): "*Doctor Seraphicus*").

St Bonaventure is often referred to as the Second Founder of the Franciscan Order.

These are some of the key highpoints from the works of Bonaventure to reflect on:

- **Incarnation** is God's complete self-communication/expression of Himself to creation
 - Sin is the least important reason for the Incarnation (Bonaventure does not totally leave the theology of the Dominican school)
- **Trinity**
 - Humility, poverty (kenosis), self-emptying is an essential aspect of God's nature
 - God is the highest good. As Francis would say "God is good, the most high good, the supreme good, You who alone are Good."
 - The Trinity might best be understood as "fountain-fullness" or the source that is constantly overflowing to fill us.
 - Trinity is total and mutual relationship.
 - God's nature is the highest good/love which is constantly given away in the act of creation.

"Bonum est sui diffusivum" ("goodness is diffusive") or directed outward to the other – this is the heart of Franciscan theology!

It is appropriate that we begin our look at the development of Franciscan Spirituality from the place where it all begins, the Most Holy Trinity.

Bonaventure begins his journey into the depths of the Trinity with the solid understanding that the ultimate act of God's love was the Incarnation, God's total self-emptying (kenosis) in

order to fully communicate and express Himself (His nature) in a way understandable to mankind, through Jesus.

Much of Bonaventure's work leads us deeply into the mystery of the Trinity, and the image of a fountain is possibly the best way to understand the life of the Trinity in his writings. Trinity is a community of perfect loving relationship (e.g. total self-giving, total receiving by the other, and total reflection back to the giver), so intense and complete that it is an ever-flowing fountain or spring, constantly drenching creation with sustaining love.

To be perfect, love cannot and does not by nature withhold anything of itself from the object of the love (Lover and Beloved).

The relationship of love within the Trinity is internal (intra) to the nature of the Trinity, and all creation is the product of that "perfect" and totally shared love. (In Francis' day it was called the fecundity of God and was understood that perfect love shared perfectly must be fertile and productive).

Franciscan thought brings about the insight that this internal relationship within the Trinity is intrinsically connected to the ongoing act of creation and through the act of Incarnation, we, humanity, are given a special invitation to enter into relationship with the Trinity.

Bonaventure in his writings will go on to explore the images of God found throughout creation (one such work is the "Breviloquium"), relating the presence of God existing in all things.

Using the model of a book, Bonaventure, in the first chapter, describes the Trinity as being present and shining forth in all of creation. All parts of the created world in its own way and capacity bears the marks of its creator and offers its own song of praise, whether as a vestige, an image or lastly a similitude.

- The **vestige** is the reality and presence of God in all created things and creatures.
- **Image** is the gift given to the rational beings (people), who have the presence of God within them and by free will are capable of touching the spirit of God within or rejecting it. Note, however, that our choice of rejecting does not reduce or eliminate the presence of God within.
- Lastly, **similitude** is the goal of Franciscan spirituality (St. Clare's gift), where we are, like Francis, not to just accept and acknowledge before the world the presence of God within, but are called to conform ourselves to become an external view of that internal reality. We are called to be transformed into the imitations of Jesus.

The first part alluded to in the "Breviloquium", is the Book of Creation, where we begin to see, albeit dimly, the traces of God throughout all of creation. An image or trace that

becomes clearer as we transform ourselves into purer and more complete imitations of Jesus.

Still at this time in medieval history, the predominant theological thought was that Jesus came to die for our sins. This remained true for Bonaventure, who, though he acknowledged sin as the last and least important reason, still believed that sin, was “one” of the reasons for the Incarnation.

Following the work of Bonaventure, and succeeding him to the Chair of Theology at the University of Paris, was Friar John “Duns” Scotus.

John Duns Scotus

[Blessed John](#) (*Johannes*) **Duns Scotus**, [O.F.M.](#) (c. 1265 – 8 November 1308) was one of the more important [theologians](#) and [philosophers](#) of the [High Middle Ages](#). He was nicknamed *Doctor Subtilis* for his penetrating and subtle manner of thought. Scotus has had considerable influence on [Catholic](#) thought.

In John’s writing, though not as well organized as the “Summa” of Thomas Aquinas, the Franciscan School moved away from atonement-based theology, which had become the primary theology of the Dominican school. After many years of debate, the Dominican based approach would become the most widely held theology within the Church, though the position of the Franciscan School as secondary remained and still remains today a fully accepted Tradition or alternate theology within the Church, so much so that many of our Roman Pontiffs became members of the Secular Franciscan Order.

Scotus will take the final step in establishing the Franciscan approach/school and our approach to God by explaining that the Incarnation was always the primary goal for all of God’s creation, a plan that could not be changed or altered by mankind’s activities.

It was the desire of God to embrace and in turn be embraced, and this desire, not the sin of man, was the reason for the coming of Jesus, the fulfillment of the intention that became creation. Bl. John Scotus expresses his understanding in his work, the “Primacy of Christ”, the theological foundation that stems from the lived reality of Francis of Assisi.

Scotus places Jesus and the Incarnation firmly at the absolute core of Christian belief. Not starting with the need for a sin offering as we still do today, (we Franciscans so often start here too), but at a beginning based on a total and completely free expression of God's love and otherness. Sure we don't deny that Jesus redeemed us and died because of sin, but Jesus was always God's first intention or master plan and would have become incarnate (taken on our humanity) regardless of sin or anything else.

Jesus came to show us the depths of God's love and desire to love us, and to offer us the invitation to be loved by us in return. He gave us a true model of how to live life through love and respect for each other.

Jesus passion and death shows us that God loves us so much there is nothing He would hold back on our behalf. Such complete, unconditional and steadfast love on God's part is the wonderful journey we come to understand, through Scripture, through community and through living authentic lives that seek Jesus.

Scotus affirms that Jesus is the reason, not just for the season as the popular slogan proclaims, but for the existence for all creation. All was made for Him and will return to Him (as we read in the prologue to the Gospel of John 1:1-18).

It is through God's choice and total freedom that Jesus fills the role of savior and redeemer, but God was never constrained or forced to the cross in order to complete the act of salvation. God could have chosen any method including simply willing salvation. Instead He chose the cross, not from necessity, but to demonstrate the reality and depth of free unconditional love.

In this unconditional Love the welfare of the other is always the central focus of the love. Nothing can be held back whether through God's initial self-emptying communication (Incarnation) or the absolute demonstration of self-giving and sacrificial love.

All is freely given up for you!

Bl. John Duns Scotus Primacy of Christ

- The Incarnation is not a divine after thought or reaction to any event, but the cornerstone of the whole plan of creation
- Everything that was, is & ever will be is based in Christ
- The relationship between divinity & humanity
God & humanity are intrinsically united and all creation is centered in Jesus
- **Creation is based on God's absolute freedom and love, e.g God's very nature, and not a need.**

Figure 5 Scotus - Primacy of Christ

John's insights into the nature of God lead us to another important concept, "thisness" (in Latin "*Haecceitas*"). This concept relates to each of us, as unique individual gifts of God, and as gifts we are loved because we simply "ARE", not because of anything we accomplish.

Think of it this way: Before you were born, there were an infinite number of possibilities for the "you" that would eventually come into creation. Once you were created, the created "you" is the specific one, of all the infinite possibilities, that God always desired and loves, unconditionally and this love is what called you into being.

You are the unique and specific one that is the apple of God's eye.

Thisness [*haecceitas*]

The doctrine of thisness applied to the human person invests each individual with a unique value as one single individual wanted and loved by God, **apart from any trait, attribute, accomplishment, similarity to others or any contribution to society.**

Of the infinite possibilities for a "you" the specific, unique "you" is the one wanted & loved by God and called into being.

We are a unique, customized, gift from God

Figure 6 Scotus, Thisness (*haecceitas*)

The Franciscan Spiritual tradition, though one of many in the church, is focused on encouraging all Franciscans, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Orders, to move beyond a “Me and God” faith to a faith that truly lives the great commandments of Love. The essence of the Rule of all the branches of the Franciscan Family is simple: “To observe the Gospel of Jesus Christ”.

Until we can see God instead of ourselves and our own wants as the center of the universe, we cannot fully understand what the Father is offering us in Jesus. Until we decide to begin the difficult journey inward, to become fully mature in Christ, to become Eucharist blessed, broken, and given for others, we cannot break out of the consumer-oriented, performance-based spirituality of ascent (“upward spiritual mobility”) and embrace the path of descent or littleness walked by Jesus and later by Francis.

Until we understand that we stand alone and naked before God, without any accomplishments and without any successes, and understand/experience that God is totally consumed with love for each of us, we cannot fathom the depth and passion of God’s love and His desire to share this love with us.

We are contingent beings, we do not exist by our own force of will and we do not hold ourselves in creation. We are completely dependent on another for our very existence. We are dependent on God. This is why Francis could call himself a worm, as worth nothing, because alone he was nothing – God is everything, and Francis found himself in awe of this greatest of lovers.

The beauty here is that God wills our existence and continues our existence, simply because He loves us, desires us and hopes we will love Him in return.

Here in our absolute littleness and “creature-li-ness” is where we can experience the embrace, peace and joy of a love beyond any loves, and here alone can we become aware of our totally gifted beloved-ness.

Summary & Conclusions: Franciscan Spirituality in 7 Steps

The summary, compliments of Friar Joe Schwab OFM: director of the Franciscan Renewal Center “The Casa” in Scottsdale, AZ

Franciscans view the world and God's creative presence in a particular way. How we understand this and our relationship to God is at the heart of what we call Franciscan spirituality. The following are key themes in Franciscan theology (how we understand God) and consequently in Franciscan spirituality (how we relate to God). We owe this understanding to the experience of St. Francis first, then to his followers throughout the ages, particularly St. Clare.

1. God is absolute love, being and creativity. Creation is dependent upon God to exist.

No created thing exists because of its own capacity to be; only God is capable of being without depending on something else. The development of created things through time reflects God's inexhaustible ability to be creative and to remain the source of demonstrated love.

2. God has freely chosen incarnation (taking on human form) before the human choice for sin.

Jesus Christ comes to us because God loves us, not because we sin. Because of sin, Jesus comes in a particular way out of free will, not because a particular method of human behavior is needed to save us. God can simply will salvation, because God is always free. Christ chooses to be with us physically now through the Eucharist until he comes again. This is reflective of God's willingness to be with us in humble ways and to nourish us physically and spiritually.

3. Christmas is of primary importance to us.

Easter is the outcome of Christmas. The Incarnation is the greatest thing God could do for creation. The death of Jesus on the cross remains a mystery, because even given human sin, God was not constrained to act in this unbelievable self sacrificial way. It was done to attract us to divine love.

4. Christ is the perfect image of who God is for creation.

He is the mirror of who and what all humanity and created things are meant to be. Creatures participate in this perfection to the capacity of their natures. Humans can choose to not participate in Christ. Mary is the human person who has most perfectly chosen to participate in imaging God, both physically and spiritually.

5. Every creature is unique, gifted, and living in relationship.

No human life is a mistake, because everyone is uniquely gifted. The relationships of life are meant to be deepened according to the nature of the creature. This reflects the nature of God, who lives in Trinity and is therefore capable of the greatest depth of relationship.

6. Nothing humans have the ability to do has the capacity to make God do something.

God is always freely choosing love for humanity, even when we don't see that the choice is the best. Our knowledge is too limited by space and time, while God is not limited by them. We all remain poor at God's table, because God doesn't owe us anything.

7. Mercy, forgiveness and justification are God's actions.

They do not result from our actions. We work on our salvation, while recognizing that even our capacity to want to do good comes as a gift from God. We must do what we can - the freedom to choose comes from God - but realize that God is behind the ability to do good. God respects our freedom so much that he asks us to cooperate with him.

Franciscan Spirituality (God is love)

God always intended to incarnate (become human) into creation whether or not humans choose to sin. The sin of Adam and Eve does not make God "decide" to become incarnate and act as a redeemer. God incarnates because God loves creation and wants it to experience His love in a way appropriate to creatures. We can be intimate with God because of the incarnation. Because of the human choice for sin, however, God incarnate (Jesus Christ) comes as a redeemer, not because it's the only possibility but because God wants to show us that self sacrifice is the strongest way to demonstrate love and to conquer sin.

Part 2 St Clare of Assisi and her Gift to the Franciscan Family

Lectio Divina compared to Clare's Mirror of Eternity (a Franciscan lectio)

Clare in her instructions to her sisters, placed the starting point of their spirituality at the Incarnation, and focused her instructions on the goodness of God, the goodness of all creation, and that God could not be found apart from world.

In fact God was connected to and his presence permeated all of creation, hence true spirituality required an immersion into and embracing of nature. God himself became human, took on a human body with all its trappings and because of that action denied that sanctity was found in the soul severed from the body.

Even the Gospels record Jesus' concern for the bodily welfare of people contrary to the medieval monastic separation. Jesus and Clare's concern was for the whole person, not just one or the other part. This earthiness incorporated into spirituality is a major shift from the contemporary spirituality of her day.

For Clare, Jesus showed the totality and completeness of God's love and challenges us to aspire to the same heights of care and concern for each other. Clare called on her sisters and all, especially her beloved brothers (Friars) to realize that heaven is not so much a place out there, but is very much a relationship based on unconditional love. We are also on the path of littleness, called to understand and embrace our complete and absolute dependence on God, and that we continue to exist only because of His love.

As with Francis this littleness is based on the poverty and humility of God, who chose to empty Himself, take on human estate and enter into a fully mutual relationship with us. This pair, Poverty and Humility if embraced, open up to us the doors to transformation.

- Jesus reveals the totality/completeness of God's Love and the heights we are called to aspire to.
- Everything that exists is dependent on God, is uniquely and completely loved by God.
- For Clare, to enter the door to transformation requires understanding the depth of God's love for each and every one of us, unconditionally and the armed with that knowledge and understanding to embrace poverty and humility.

Poverty & Humility - Doors to Transformation

In Franciscan Spirituality, the poverty and humility of God form the foundation of our entire theology. God's desire to love with us and be physically with us is manifested in Jesus, the Word of the Father. Our God is a God not of vindication but a God of reckless abandon, giving everything (kenosis) in order to complete His desire to love each one of us.

This is what fed the insatiable desire of Francis to conform himself to Jesus, imitating Him as completely as possible. Francis sees Jesus in the same light as the Father, poor and humble but the beloved (totally loved) Son of the Father. Francis too wants to become a beloved son of the Father and pursues a life imitating his (as he remarks) elder brother Jesus who alone can lead him to the Father.

For this reason Francis for himself sets out on a path of poverty and humility in imitation of the life Jesus lived. This is the only way he sees where it is possible to move beyond personal needs and wants, beyond ourselves and to reach the place of transformation and surrender.

These are the keystones:

- Poverty is our approach to God from a place of littleness and emptiness. It is not necessarily a poverty of want or need, but a poverty of fully embracing our humanity and recognizing our complete and total dependence on God, (contingency).
- In our nothingness we stand in awe of God's total love of us, God's emptying Himself in order to become our Lover. The only question is will we allow ourselves to be the beloved?
- Humility is our ability to allow ourselves to be vulnerable in order to enter into mutual not using relationships with each other. As God our Loving Father stoops down low to embrace us in Love, can we also stoop down low to embrace each other in love. This is the example of Incarnation!

Transformation

Why Transformation? We often sing we are the body of Christ, yet most often we do not treat and respect each other in a way that shows the same respect that Jesus showed. We often sing the tune but don't enter the words and become that which we sing about. In the same way, Clare's goal was to give the Franciscan family the tools necessary to in fact become what you sing, become what you love.

She emphasizes our uniqueness and lovability, pointing out there is nothing in our power that can put us beyond God's love and hopes for us. Our dignity (John Scotus would later define this as our "thisness") comes from just being. We are individually unique and chosen by God as His beloved.

We are challenged by Clare to become what we love, to become the image of Jesus.

This image of God we seek to see in the mirror (Mirror of Eternity) is the image of Christ and our actions are his actions of accepting our call (vocation) and becoming great by becoming the servant of all.

Time out for a rest and to reflect!

The Mirror of Eternity reflection questions.



Try this exercise: get a hand mirror and look into it:

- Describe what you see in the mirror.
- What service does the mirror provide?
- What do you see when you gaze on the Cross of Jesus?
- Consider the Cross your mirror – what do you see?
- Whose image is reflected?

I talk about mirror, because for Clare the tool to transformation is called the mirror of Eternity – it is the cross of Christ. Now put morbid aside and repeat the same exercise about using the cross (with corpus please) in place of the mirror and journal or share what you see reflected in the cross.

Sure Jesus on the cross is not pretty, we get an image of the cruelty of man and his willingness to inflict pain and horror in the name of “somebody’s” justice or rule of law, but look past the physical horror that was inflicted.

There is more there than pain and suffering, a lot more (you can use the gazing exercise at the end of the section). Look deeply into the eyes of Jesus and find there that which you have always longed for!

What message is God giving you in the face of Jesus?

Clare asked her sisters to gaze on the face of Jesus until you could begin to see your own face there. Then you would be at the start of the path that leads to true imitation of Christ.

It’s not for the weak or faint hearted, Francis was rewarded with the stigmata after a slow lifelong process of transformation.

Consider the cross as a mirror, does the outward image there reflect the reality of the person within (flip back to the hand mirror and ask the same question)?

Is not following Christ, i.e. being a Christian, about reflecting to the world the visible reality of Jesus, and in reflecting back Jesus to the world to share in the suffering of the Cross? Or is Christian, just a name to feel good about?

Consider the Eucharist, is it a private me and Jesus moment, an exercise in personal piety? Or do I see Eucharist as sacrament I too must become?

Does it affect the transformation of those who receive and become an invitation in which like Jesus we are blessed, broken and given for many?

Clare's gift – the transforming tool, the Mirror of Eternity, the Cross

- The Cross of Christ is Love made visible
- The Mirror of Eternity defines the depth of God's love of us
- Inward image of ourselves
- The image we reflect to the world
- How the cross transforms us to be blessed, broken and given in love for many.
- Eucharist is not personal piety, but is the Body and Blood of Jesus combining with our own body and blood, transforming us into what we love and becoming visible in the world.

Lectio Divina and Franciscan Lectio

I mentioned earlier that Clare, though forced into a cloistered life maintained her evangelical spirit and embrace for all creation. For her and her sisters and as a gift to all future Franciscans she left us the mirror of perfection exercise, which in prayer form follows the monastic "lectio divina" but arrives at a different place with a different challenge.

Look at the differences below, between Lectio Divina and the Mirror of Eternity. St. Clare grounds us firmly in God's creation, so with our feet planted firmly on God's earth we may come to experience our Creator in nature (all creation), not separated from it.

At times throughout life, we make poor and unloving choices. We sometimes fail to recognize that everything God creates is good and is loveable and calls us back into relationship. There is no dualism here, but a healthy holistic spirituality that truly embodies the experience of God's love from both Francis and Clare.

Where lectio stops, in the contemplative quiet, for the Franciscan, much like the example of Jesus, contemplation becomes the condition of experiencing God that gives us fuel to move from the mountaintop to the valleys where all creation waits to be loved and embraced.

Lectio Divina compared to Clare's Mirror of Perfection

<p>Lectio Divina Components of this monastic prayer Reading Sacred Scripture</p>	<p>Clare's Mirror of Perfection Franciscan form of Lectio Divina</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read (lectio) a Scripture passage – read silently & out loud, - savor the words, take your time it's not speed reading, linger on the text, taste and see 2. Meditate (meditation) on the text – place yourself into the story, become one of the participants, enter into the experience. 3. Pray (oratio) – allow the text/story move you into prayer, praise, thanksgiving, supplication. 4. Contemplate (contemplatio) – just sit quietly and be still, this part is waiting on God – be patient and allow God to be God. If you are patient and persistent God is then free to become more united with you and allow you some escape from the world. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gaze upon Him -- gaze at the cross of Christ and visually embrace the love you see there. 2. Consider Him – think of all the things Jesus has done for me. How do I participate in His life, loving, forgiving, healing others? 3. Contemplate him – move beyond care for self and into care, love and service to others - get out of yourself and take the path of humility so I can be emptied of self and filled with God. 4. Imitate Him – The goal of Franciscan Prayer is to enable us to imitate Jesus. Our prayer is affective (feeling, experiential relational), we do not seek to escape from the world to find God, but to immerse ourselves into the world because God is there, and all creation is good. <p><i>Where Lectio ends with a quiet waiting our affective prayer insists that after our time of quiet solitude with God we become active in imitating Jesus in our relationship with all creation. Franciscans use Lectio to enlighten our minds and experiences but then we must become “of the heart” to transform ourselves and the world.</i></p>

To follow Clare's way of being truly Franciscan, we must push ourselves to transform ourselves into becoming not just a Eucharistic people, a people who gather in thanksgiving, but a people who become Eucharist, and are blessed, broken and given for each other and for the true life of the world! As we transform ourselves into the image of Jesus we are also becoming sacrament, yes, an outward sign of Jesus meant to be an occasion of grace for others.

Mirror of Eternity Meditative Prayer of gazing

- Gaze upon Him – visually embrace the crucified Christ, look deeply into His eyes, allow him to gaze into yours.
- Consider Him – how are you part of each other's lives (how do enter into the life of Jesus and how do you let Him enter into yours)? Do you dare to enter into the relationship of lover and His beloved?
- Contemplate Him – take a long loving look at the divine (also when in Eucharistic adoration). Can you see, feel, experience the depth of love as Jesus embraces the poverty of the cross, of the bread, as He further emptied Himself for love of you. How can you move beyond yourself? This is the Franciscan way of embracing our own littleness and utter dependence on God
- Imitate Him – you cannot stop with an academic understanding of love, prayer, God, but must descend into your own heart, find God already there and desire Him above all else – only this desire can fuel our own transformation into Love. Here within, with God alone is the only place we can discover our true self, as the supreme lover's beloved!

Note: one of Francis' true sufferings was to understand his unworthiness and to be awed by the complete love of the Father none the less. This is the foundation of Francis' desire to also be a beloved son of the eternal Father, the reason he sought to conform himself to his elder brother, Jesus, the beloved Son of the Loving Father.

It is said that Francis would often emerge from prayer weeping and uttering "Love is not Loved! Love is not loved!" With these words, Francis was trying to tell everyone he met that God is madly in love with us, but we fail to respond with the same kind of burning love!

“One day Francis was heard crying
in a wooded area where he went to pray.
He was agonizing over the indifference
and the coldness of so many
toward Jesus
and what he went through to win our salvation.

This was his response:
"Love is not loved, Love is not loved".

In his own response he tried to make up
for the ingratitude of so many.

*The following three photos in the visual meditation were
taken by Bob Fitzsimmons, SFO at
Our Lady of Peace Retreat Center in Beaverton, OR
June 2005*

Visual Meditation

Gaze on Him

visually embrace the crucified Christ

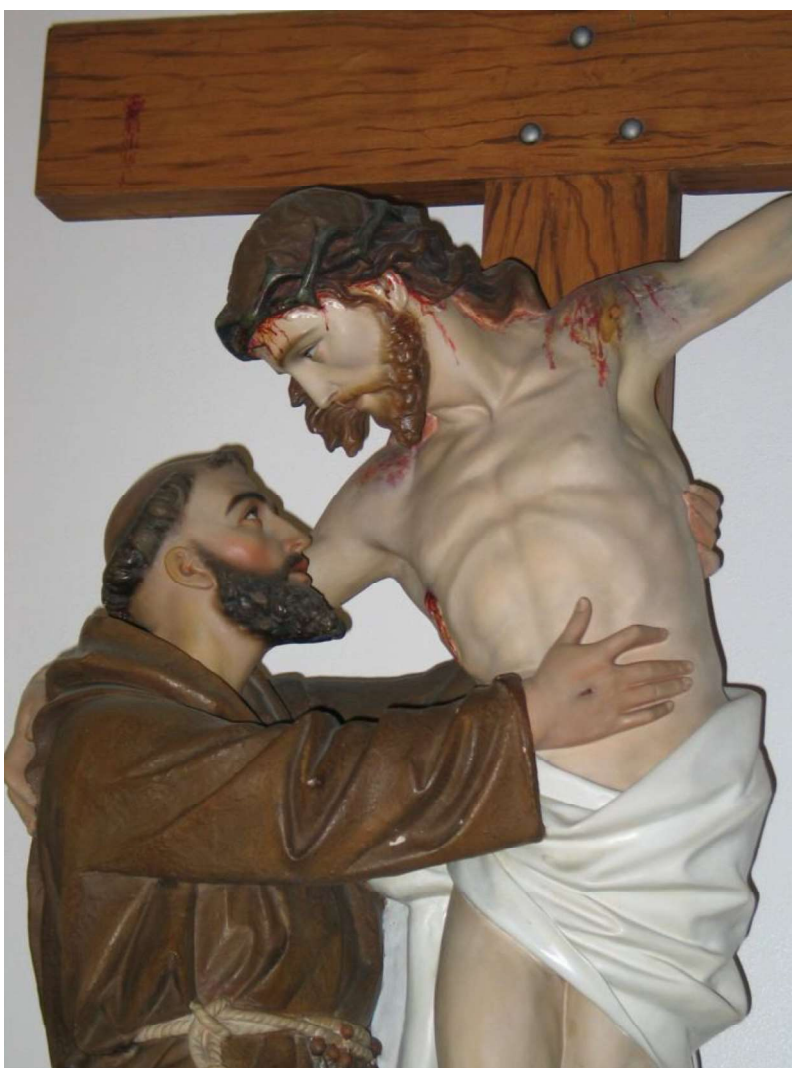
“Who are you O God, and who am I?”



Consider Him

- how do I participate in His life?

loving, forgiving & healing, hold and return His loving gaze



Contemplate Him

**Spend some time and take a long loving look at the divine
move beyond ourselves and allow ourselves to be transformed to imitate.**

What does Jesus, gaze express?



Imitate Him

become that which we love in reality & action.

Leads us to see God in all creation & invites our participation



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