

Poverty and Joy — Wm. Short OFM – pp. 30-36

FRANCIS AND FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY: To understand Franciscan spirituality we must begin with the spirituality of Francis himself, *il Poverello*, ‘the little poor man’ of Assisi. And to begin, we may again use some remarks from Martial Lekeux:

“The life of the Poverello may seem more cheerful and more peaceful than that of some of the other saints. But the truth is that he was the saint of excesses: excess in sacrifice, excess in love: and it was the reason of his excesses that he held to the happy medium, because his disregard for moderation worked both ways, just as a scale insures better equilibrium the longer it is on both sides.

Francis is the saint of excesses and yet he is the saint with a smile, because he always fused the two. For him, penance was love, and sorrow ‘perfect joy.’ Using this standard, folly was wisdom and excess supreme moderation.

We must make some sense of this ‘excessive’ saint if we wish to understand the beginnings and the permanent foundation of the Franciscan tradition. But understanding the tradition does not mean stopping with Francis. Otherwise we would have only the spirituality of an individual, not a ‘tradition.’ The word itself, from the Latin word for ‘handing over’, indicates that others received something from Francis. What was it? For his contemporaries, friends, companions, brothers and sisters, it was the experience of knowing Francis himself: he was the message. In a popular expression of the times, he taught them ‘by word and example’ (*verbo et exemplo*). And, by their own testimony, he was for them a living example of what he taught: He edified his listeners by his example as well as his words: ‘he made his whole body a tongue;’ ‘more than someone who prayed, he had become prayer’: these are some of the descriptions of Francis recalled by Thomas of Celano. That is, his whole person had become the message he was trying to communicate.

And what was that message? In a word, it was Jesus. To express it in such simple terms today may seem banal to us, or pious, or quaint. But for Francis, the discovery of Jesus, ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ’, was the ongoing revelation of his whole life in the twenty years after his conversion. In his early years, he discovered Jesus as the one who led him among the lepers, and made their presence ‘sweet’ to him, rather than ‘bitter’. He then discovered Jesus the preacher of conversion, announcing the reign of God. Over the years he began to see more clearly Jesus as the incarnate Son of God at Bethlehem, then as the Suffering Servant on Calvary, and finally, ‘the Lord’ of all things, raised up in glory after his death. And in this Lord, the glorified Son, he also understood the Trinitarian God.

It is through ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’ that Francis understands Mary, the Church, the Scriptures, priesthood, the poor, his brothers and sisters, and all creatures. It is ultimately through and in Jesus that Francis even understands himself. Though he seldom used the title ‘Christ’ by itself to refer to Jesus, his spirituality, and that of the Franciscan tradition after him, has been characterized as ‘Christocentric.’

If there is one word which does complete justice to Franciscan theology and spirituality, it is ‘Christocentric,’ and they have this as their distinguishing feature, because the faith and holiness of St. Francis were totally centered on Christ. In Jesus Christ the revelation is made to us of what the world, as a whole and in all its parts, means to God.

CLARE AND FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY: Chief among the keepers and shapers of the Franciscan tradition is Clare of Assisi. She would describe herself as a *plantacula*, ‘a little plant’ of Francis, a term that has often let readers of her writings to assume a kind of inferiority. In context, however, Clare’s name for herself indicates something different: she is separate but connected, rooted in the same soil of the gospel, sharing with Francis a ‘form of life’ she received from him as a gift from God. But the way in which she expresses her growing, intimate knowledge of ‘following the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is uniquely her own. What unites Clare and Francis is not an identical experience of Christ, but different experiences of the same Christ.

In the last decade Clare has begun to assume, perhaps for the first time in the Franciscan tradition, the importance she deserves as the first interpreter of the Franciscan tradition. With the community of women who gathered around her, she served as an essential bridge between the earliest days of the Franciscan tradition and

its communication to later generations. Since she outlived Francis by nearly thirty years – he died in 1226, she in 1253 – her interpretation of the ‘founding moments’ of the Franciscan school helped to shape the tradition in ways we are only now beginning to understand. One example may help to illustrate this important point. In the account of Clare’s death, written within a year of the event, the description of people at her deathbed is illuminating. There is Leo, formerly secretary to Francis and one of his early companions. With him are Rufino and Angelo, two other early companions and personal friends. And these three are generally believed to be the most important sources for much of the knowledge we have of Francis’ life. And, among all the early texts of the tradition, where do we find them, after Francis’ death, all in the same place? Only at Clare’s side. While the scene as it is described is probably historically accurate (the participants were all still living when Clare’s *Life* was published), it is even more important for what it represents symbolically: Clare at the centre of the early companions, at the core of the tradition as it is being handed over to the next generation. For this reason, some authors today are beginning to speak of a ‘Francis-Clarian’ tradition. More than a disciple, Clare is also a creative architect of the tradition she lived.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT: In the centuries following the deaths of Francis and Clare the tradition they established kept alive some great themes enunciated in their writings and exemplified in their lives, and neglected others, as we will see in the pages that follow. Controversies about the real intentions of the founders led to reforms and divisions, typifying the kind of anarchy that some have seen at the heart of this movement.

The order which has been through the most crises is certainly that of St. Francis, a fine example of triumphant anarchy.....On the human level, it must be admitted that to have emerged victorious from so many crises is at least a sign of extraordinary vitality.

Disputes over poverty rocked the Franciscan world from the late thirteenth through the early fourteenth century. Various reform movements championed their visions of an earlier age of truly ‘spiritual’ Franciscan life, leading to divisions that in part still mark contemporary Franciscan vocabulary: Conventuals, observants, Capuchins, Reformed, Recollects and a host of others.

The Franciscan tradition produced great theologians in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, among whom Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus are the most important. And the tradition has produced a wonderful and diverse crop of mystics and spiritual writers, from Angela of Foligno in medieval Umbria, to Benet of Canfield, a former English Puritan in seventeenth-century France.

After more than a century of suppressions, persecutions and gradual disintegration, at the end of the nineteenth century a slow recovery began. All the components of the large Franciscan Family were again flourishing during the first half of the twentieth century. With the call of the Second Vatican Council for religious families to return to the charism of their founders, the Franciscan tradition continued the long but fruitful process of rediscovering Francis and Clare begun in the late 1800s. And a study like this one would not have been possible without what can only be called the explosion of interest in the two saints from Assisi in the last twenty years.

THEMES OF THE FRANCISCAN TRADITION: After this brief overview of the history of the Franciscan tradition, a few words are in order about the themes of that tradition. Each of the following chapters will examine one of these: the incarnation; life in poverty; the lepers; the hermitages; the cross; and creation. In order of importance, the first theme of Franciscan spirituality must be that of the incarnate God. Though the topic recurs constantly in Christian spirituality, the particular emphasis given to the incarnation by Assisian saints relates it directly to their embrace of poverty as a spiritual path.

Poverty, or ‘living without grasping’, marks the writings and lives of both Francis and Clare. A key to their understanding of Christ, poverty also became a source of division among their followers.

People with Hansen’s disease (leprosy) shaped Francis’ experience of human suffering in a way that led him to see the suffering of Christ in vividly physical terms. Though their presence was important in the spirituality of Francis himself, the people with leprosy gradually ‘disappear’ in later Franciscan texts, until fairly recently.

Francis wrote a Rule for his brothers living in hermitages. These places of solitude still symbolize the long tradition of Franciscan contemplation. Championed especially by reform movements, the places of retreat produced important writers during the ‘Golden Age’ of the sixteenth-century mysticism.

The cross, with its reference to suffering, death and glorification, epitomizes for these founders the depths of charity. Clare's own vivid meditations of the 'Mirror suspended on the wood of the Cross' reveal a good deal of her own mystical identification with Christ. Francis, with his physical 'mirroring' of Christ's suffering, the 'stigmata' seen on his body, became a popular saint in the Middle Ages for his 'conformity' to the passion of Christ.

A well-known classic of medieval Italian religious poetry, Francis' 'Canticle of the Creatures' or 'Canticle of Brother Sun', opens a new chapter in the history of Christian spirituality. Here are the seeds of a spirituality that embraces creation, nature, the world, as a revelation of God, not a distraction. Early biographers of the saint point to his unique relationship of friendship, or kinship, with animals, plants, and natural elements.

These few themes hardly cover the territory of Franciscan spirituality. Hopefully they will suggest some of its important landmarks. Each of the following chapters will examine the import of one of these themes in Francis, Clare and a few of their followers. In conclusion I will suggest some ways in which this 'anarchic' and lively tradition may help to satisfy a contemporary hunger for a livable spirituality.

US Catholic Catechism for Adults - "God is the Trinity" – pp. 51-53

GOD IS THE TRINITY

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life.

—CCC, no. 261

The Old Testament shows God as one, unique, without equal. "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (*Dt 6:4; Mk 12:29*). He created the world, made a covenant with his people, and is the Father of the poor, the orphan, and the widow.

In the Creeds, we profess our faith in God as "Father almighty." His fatherhood and power illumine each other by his care for us, by adopting us as sons and daughters in Baptism and by being rich in mercy to forgive our sins. Scripture constantly praises the universal power of God as the "mighty one of Jacob" and the "LORD of hosts" (*Gn 49:24; Is 1:24ff.*). God's power is loving, for he is our Father.

God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father. (CCC, no. 239)

Jesus revealed God as Father in a new sense. God is Father in his relation to Jesus, his only begotten Son. At the Last Supper, Jesus calls God "Father" forty-five times (cf. *Jn 13-17*). The Son is divine, as is the Father (cf. *Mt 11:27*). In a later chapter, Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity will be discussed further.

Before the Passion, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit as teacher, guide, and consoler. The Spirit's appearance at Pentecost and at other events in the New Testament gives ample evidence of the Holy Spirit as the third Person of the Trinity. This, too, will be discussed in a later chapter.

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and life. God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity includes three truths of faith.

First, the Trinity is One. We do not speak of three gods but of one God. Each of the Persons is fully God. They are a unity of Persons in one divine nature.

Second, the Divine Persons are distinct from each other. Father, Son, and Spirit are not three appearances or modes of God, but three identifiable persons, each fully God in a way distinct from the others.

Third, the Divine Persons are in relation to each other. The distinction of each is understood only in reference to the others. The Father cannot be the Father without the Son, nor can the Son be the Son without the Father. The Holy Spirit is related to the Father and the Son who both send him forth.

All Christians are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity illuminates all the other mysteries of faith.

<http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/uscca/files/assets/basic-html/page-79.html#>

Catechism of the Catholic Church - #261 to #267

- 261** The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life. God alone can make it known to us by revealing himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- 262** The Incarnation of God's Son reveals that God is the eternal Father and that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, which means that, in the Father and with the Father, the Son is one and the same God.
- 263** The mission of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father in the name of the Son (*Jn* 14:26) and by the Son "from the Father" (*Jn* 15:26), reveals that, with them, the Spirit is one and the same God. "With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified" (Nicene Creed).
- 264** "The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father as the first principle and, by the eternal gift of this to the Son, from the communion of both the Father and the Son" (St. Augustine, *De Trin.* 15, 26, 47: PL 42:1095).
- 265** By the grace of Baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," we are called to share in the life of the Blessed Trinity, here on earth in the obscurity of faith, and after death in eternal light (Cf. Paul VI, *CPG* § 9).
- 266** "Now this is the Catholic faith: We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance; for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal" (Athanasian Creed; DS 75; ND 16).
- 267** Inseparable in what they are, the divine persons are also inseparable in what they do. But within the single divine operation each shows forth what is proper to him in the Trinity, especially in the divine missions of the Son's Incarnation and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed., pp. 69–70). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

<http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/files/assets/basic-html/page-69.html#>

Scripture reflection - Luke 8:9-15

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.

The Holy Bible. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Lk 8:9–15). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.