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# Francis of Assisi: The Message in His Writings

by Thaddée Matura, OFM

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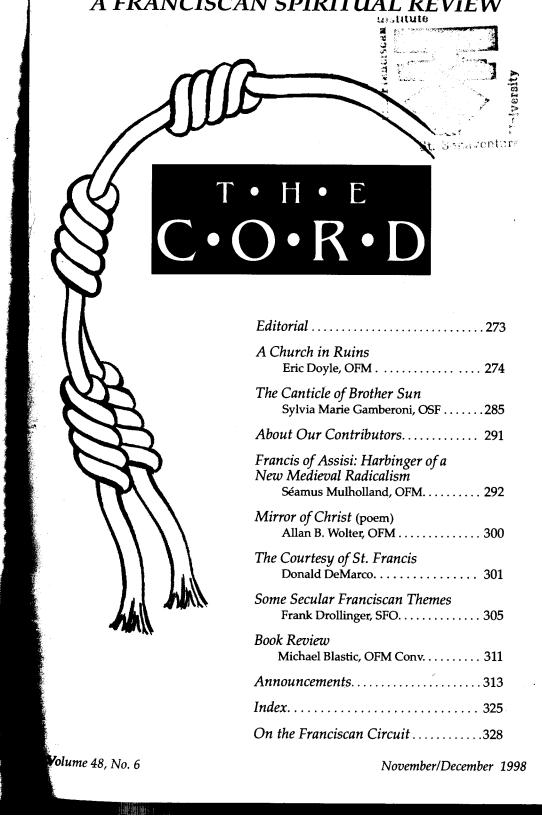
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# THE CORD A Franciscan Spiritual Review

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# **Editorial**

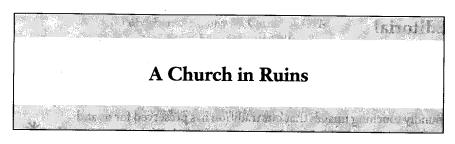
The seasons of the Church year call us to "re-member" the stories that give meaning to our lives. As we allow our memories to dwell on the amazing things that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our hearts are melted by the profoundly touching images that our tradition has preserved for us and passes on in word and ritual. No one understood this better than Francis of Assisi, who, in his natural bent towards "play," drew from the dramatic story-telling of the Church energy and delight. In his own life, the stories of the gospels came alive and were made present in highly charged dramatic action. For Francis, word and deed were as one. To know the story was to become a participant in it—to live it in such a way that its power became irresistible to others. Christmas was particularly dear to Francis. He wept at the very thought of God's complete surrender to the human situation as a helpless infant, totally dependent, totally in need, and at the thought of a mother so poor as Mary. Today the world is full of such mothers and such children. Today the Christian and Franciscan gift is still alive. May our own memories be the source of

compassion, as we take our place in the story

for our own times.

As the year draws to a close, the staff of *The Cord* and of The Franciscan Institute offer you a special word of thanks for supporting the work of sending the Franciscan story to all parts of the world. We are particularly grateful to all those who submit articles for publication. We encourage more of you to reflect "outloud," so to speak, on the meaning of the Franciscan tradition for our times and for our various cultures.

We also ask you to consider sending a gift subscription of *The Cord* to a Franciscan congregation or fraternity that cannot afford it for themselves. There are many such congregations across the English-speaking world. If you would like to offer such a gift, please send the subscription cost of \$20.00 to us, together with the name and address of the congregation, fraternity, or person you wish to support. If you want us to select a congregation, we can also do that and send the subscription in your name. Peace and all good!



# Eric Doyle, OFM

[This article is a transcription of a talk originally given in the mid-80s and preserved in tape form at The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY.]

What I want to do is to try to place St. Francis in the scene of reformer in the history of the Church to understand the precise meaning of those words—"A Church in Ruins." For this, let us return to the New Testament. And there we find it recorded that, on the night before our Lord died, he prayed for all who would believe in him through the word of the disciples. He says: "I pray not only for you, but also for all those who are to find faith in me through your word." Now, those words of our Lord recorded by the Apostle John, have their first application in the first three centuries of the Church's history, when, long before the Constantinian peace, those who believed in Christ went everyday in mortal fear of being called in and asked if they were Christians. If they avowed it or said something in a positive sense, they were asked to deny it and offer incense to the statue of the name of the emperor, and then they went free. But if they didn't, they were either thrown to hostile lions in the Roman Amphitheater or their bodies were tarred and set on fire to light up Roman orgies. It was for their faith that our Lord prayed on the night before he died.

And then there came the peace associated with the Emperor Constantine, when Church and State blended and were devoted to the same cause and end. Things seemed fine until, swinging from Byzantium to the West, the Church faced what has been called the Dark Ages, when the Goths and Ostragoths and Visigoths and Huns came teeming over the Rhine and the Danube into middle and southern Europe and laid waste the *Pax Romana* and the concord that the Empire had placed upon the ancient world. After the fall of the Empire, of course, the Church was the inner dynamic of the restoration of civilization. But during this time the bishops and the papacy descended to a degree of degradation that has never been known since. Popes fought with one another and indeed tore out one another's tongues, vying for the office of the sacred service of the unity of Christendom.

And then there came, after the Dark Ages, a great pope, Gregory VII. He managed to impose a reform of inestimable significance on the Church. It blossomed in a way that nobody could have believed possible who'd lived a hundred years before him. And it went on developing until the time of Innocent III, the pope who approved the Rule of St. Francis. Innocent III had the greatest power that any pope has ever had. He came the closest to being Lord of the world. Who would have believed that just a hundred years later the papacy would fall into the thralldom of the French. Settled at Avignon, the papal court was controlled by French influence. For a whole century only French cardinals were elected to the papal office.

And then Catherine of Siena went to the Pope, Gregory XI, and warned him, telling him to come back to Rome, which he did in the early 1370s. Having returned, however, he died. Then an Italian was elected, but within a year the Cardinals refused to accept this election and there were two popes—one at Avignon and the other in Rome. Christ prayed for the faith of the people of that time, when the very sign of unity was in fact itself divided. This goes on right until the end of the fourteenth century. There are two claimants to this most holy and sacred office of unity. And then, to the eternal shame of the Franciscan Order, a Franciscan stepped into the fray and told the other two "popes": "Step down, let me be Pope." And they said no. And so, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, we end, God help us, with three popes. And these were appointing bishops and abbots; and, as no doubt many of you know, one abbot or one superior in any monastery is more than enough!

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the problem was solved and the Church sped on its way to 1517 when Martin Luther posted his theses and the Church was divided in the West. This led to an ever greater fractioning of the body of Christ. He had prayed for faith, whether the faith of St. Thomas More, who gave his life for the primacy of the Roman See, or the faith of Sirs Ridley and Latimer, those blessed martyrs at Oxford, or the faith of Cranmer himself, who put his hand into the flames and died at Oxford for the truth of the holy gospel as he saw it.

And then we came to the Enlightenment when people said that at last human beings had come of age and we didn't really need religion. It had been all right for people less intelligent than ourselves, but now we had arrived at a high point of human development and religion was destined to die. As we got into the nineteenth century, this belief became more and more the case in people's minds. Human beings seemed to be on the verge of absolute perfectibility. Finally, we came to our own century and have now hit a period of agnosticism. Christ prayed for our faith on the night before he died, that we would not lose faith in him who is the Lord of all history, the victor over that death which is the last and the most insidious of all our enemies.

In the context of this continual change and renewal, I believe that we need to place this poor little man, St. Francis of Assisi, for he was a reformer long, long before the sixteenth century. He was an evangelical long, long before those splendid people of the late sixteenth century who longed to return to the purity of the teaching of the gospel. You see, he was indeed a medieval man. He belonged to the thirteenth century; he flourished in the thirteenth century. But he saw in the thirteenth century the need to go back to the only conformity that the Church itself must comply with, namely, the teaching of the holy Gospel. And without a word of criticism, without ever making any remarks about the papacy or the bishops of the thirteenth century, he himself brought the Christ of the gospels right into the heart of the medieval world. As Chesterton so beautifully describes it: "It was as if after a long dark night not unvisited by stars, he stood there on a hill and around him was a burst of birds singing and behind him was the break of day."

There was to be now a new presence of the gospel of Christ. For a thousand years, since the Council of Nicaea, the Church had emphasized all that separates Christ from us because the Church was afraid of Arius. Arius had said that our Lord was some kind of hybrid really, neither God nor man but something in between. God had fashioned him before fashioning the world and had sent him into our midst as a messenger. The Council of Nicaea had thundered against this doctrine and said no, this can't be right. The Eternal One has become one of us. Ephesus and Constantinople repeated it and the Council of Chalcedon clarified it. But once you emphasize our Lord's divinity with an imbalance, then you must emphasize all the things that separate him from us. And so you have those magnificent views of our Lord in the apses of the cathedrals, in his utter majesty, standing looking down at you with the holy gospel, alpha and omega written on it, resting upon his knee. And as he gazes at you, you think: "Oh dear, what on earth have I got in common with this?" How is it possible to think that this was the Lord who walked the earth?

And suddenly you see this poor, ragged little man who never went to school, who never learned any philosophy, who never learned any theology, suddenly, from what he had grasped in the holy scriptures, bringing Christ right out of the apses to walk in the midst of medieval society again. In his own members, in his own very life, people saw again the man who had been born in a stable, who had been kept warm by the hot breath of an ox and an ass, the little boy who had learned the trade of a carpenter and got enormous hands and splinters doing it, the little boy who had learned to sing the songs that we sing and knew about David and Solomon, his ancestors in the Old Testament. In Francis people recognized the young man who went out into the heat of the Palestinian sun to tell everyone that God's name was "Abba"; who spoke of this immortal and nameless God in terms of familiarity that had never before been heard in the history of the Jewish people; whose heart was broken when he

found a sorrowing widowed mother standing beside the coffin of her only son being taken to its burial; who visited Martha and Mary across the Jordan in Bethany and who wept when he heard that his friend Lazarus was dead; who grieved over the city of Jerusalem and said that he would gather it to himself in the way that a hen gathers its chicks.

In Francis people perceived the one who, on the night before he died, took some bread and quite simply said: "This is my body. This is my blood," and who then went out into the Garden of Gethsemene and crawled around in circles of despair because he was petrified of what would happen to him the next day; who was battered into the wood of the cross and died slowly of bleeding to death and asphyxiation and called out those terrible words: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And his question was never answered. It has gone echoing down the eons of time until today, as his cross casts its shadow over the Church, over the Church's every success, and over the world's every effort to better the lot of humanity. The cross casts its shadow mysteriously, incomprehensibly, as it will to the end of time.

This was the Christ that St. Francis brought back. The one who had shared the lot of what it is to be like us in history, to be born and to have a memory, to live into the future towards the death that is inexorable. It was in the representation of the life of our Lord (and that's what it is, a representation, almost a living exegesis) that St. Francis saw the renewal of the Church taking place. This renewal wasn't any theory; it didn't necessarily aim first at changing anything. Rather, it sought to bring back the figure of this man who was God's own presence in human history, in whom God himself had learned what it means to have a memory lighted by experience, what it means to look towards a future and tremble before it and then go finally to death.

That's what Francis brought back, and he brought it back so graphically that he himself was the first affected by it. That is the heart of his conversion. A conversion is not simply a moral process where somebody says: "Well, you know, I've been rather bad and now I'm going to try and be good." Christianity and the gospel do not consist in moralizing; they consists in a total shift of meaning. Everything now takes on a fresh meaning through a relationship. Therefore, conversion in St. Francis first of all meant that he had discovered a relationship with someone. It was a metanoia of the mind and the heart and the soul and the psyche and the body. It was a complete and utter transformation of a lonely man into a relationship whereby he was then able, slowly, to allow the loneliness to be transformed into aloneness. There is the glorious meaning of his celibacy. Through a relationship with the unseen one, Christ our Lord, he was able to arrive at that point of self-possession where he could tolerate what it means to be alone in this world and at the same time in relationship with others.

And that's his reform. It wasn't a question of saying the papacy must be overthrown or the papacy was in sin—that would be Luther's reform (and nobody is allowed to judge Martin Luther). It wasn't going around the churches of Tuscany preaching against the excesses of Alexander VI, the Borgia pope—that would be Savanarolla, who was eventually burned to death. It wasn't even the medieval reformers who left the Church and said: "Oh no, this contains nothing of the gospel," and created something outside it. It was none of that.

Rather, it was from inside the Church. The only real, true evangelical reform is about a relationship with the central figure of the New Testament. This relationship was consolidated for St. Francis when he experienced that he was loved by God without condition, that he had a brother who had been given without qualification, without any condition, without asking the world or humanity to do anything. This brother had been given out of the utterly gratuitous infinite love of the eternal God solely because God loves the cosmos, which in Greek is the sum total of created reality. And that's what St. Francis grasped and what makes him so serious.

I have never, never seen St. Francis smile, not even in my dreams or when I close my eyes and I try to think what he looked like or when I read Celano's beautiful word picture or see Cimabue's paintings or the Subiaco Francis or even Francis's bones, of which I saw pictures when they opened his tomb in 1978. I have never seen him smile, at least not at me. I don't know whether that says something about me or whether it says something about St. Francis or whether I feel that I'm far from what he stood for. Nevertheless, I wish to make the point that I think there is a seriousness about him, a seriousness that sometimes the romantic picture tends to forget. There is a deadly serious side to this man when it comes to his relationship with our Lord and what conversion and reform mean for him.

Thomas of Celano says of him that when he was at prayer, he so fixed his attention on what he was saying to God, "totus non tam orans quam oratio factus" (2Cel 95), that he was not so much praying as having become himself a prayer, "oratio factus." Now this, I believe, is the development of his relationship with Jesus Christ; he loved our Lord unspeakably. We know from a recently discovered version of a sermon of St. Bonaventure that St. Francis used to say that he considered anyone his brother who loved the crucified Lord. This is the whole of the ecumenical movement in a sentence. Francis drove a coach and four through all our disciplines and our laws and our ways of putting barriers between one another. He considered anyone his brother who loved the crucified Jesus. He proved that by dialoguing with the Sultan at Damietta. He went into the camp of the Muslims and there he dialogued with Malik al-Kamil about Christianity and Islam. The prophet Muhammad speaks with very great reverence of Jesus Christ in the Koran. He didn't think he was the Son of God, but nevertheless he traced him in the line of Abraham and the prophets of Israel.

But maybe St. Francis knew that Islam did to that degree respect our Lord and saw this as the basis of a dialogue.

"Non tam orans quam oratio factus." Prayer. It is impossible to speak of this renewal and reform in St. Francis unless we know him as a man related to Christ, as a man of prayer. Now, prayer requires us to know that God is the Holy One. In Chapter 23 of the Rule of 1221, St. Francis speaks of God as ineffable, incomprehensible, everlasting, all holy, blessed, eternal, three-inone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom is honor and glory for ever and ever. He had a sense of the utter "otherness" of God, a sense of the utter mystery of God as mysterium tremendum. Remember in the Dies Ire, "Rex tremendae majestatis, qui salvandos salvas gratis, salva me, fons pietatis—King of terrible majesty, who by your own most holy will save those whom you choose, save me also, source of holiness." St. Francis had an indescribable sense that God is not a chum, he's not somebody just simply there alongside everything else—he is "terrible mystery."

At the same time he is of course alluring, terribly alluring, attractive. His holiness means that there is utter integrity between who he is and what he wills. And it is God's will that we be like that—like God, so that what appears in our eyes and comes from our lips is the same as is found in our head and our heart. That is holiness and integrity. And therefore pure integrity, pure being (which is what God is) is alluring—very, very attractive. It is the source of all that sense of unease in all of us, that sense of restlessness, that sense of looking for something. We can't identify it properly, but it's there. It's almost as if an answer was given and then the questions came. There are only questions first of all because there was an answer, and the answer is the Word. Throughout the life of St. Francis, in all his writings and in all the sources, one finds this dual aspect of Francis's understanding of God, the tension between the God of all holiness and the God of indescribable attractiveness.

I think St. Francis would have loved Kenneth Grahame's classic, *The Wind in the Willows*. In Chapter 7 of this children's book, the Mole and the Rat go up the river looking for the baby Otter. Rowing along the river they come to a small island. They moor the boat, get onto the island and then, moving towards its center, they see the vision of Pan with the hooked nose and the kindly eyes and the shaggy limbs. The pipe has just fallen away from the parted lips and he is beginning to smile; and there, nesting between his hooves, the round, tiny, childish, pudgy form of the baby Otter. Mole, who had learned something about the river by this time, turns to Rat, who was extremely clever and competent and very bossy, and says to him: "'Rat, are you afraid?' Rat says: 'Afraid? Afraid! Of *Him?* Oh, never, never! And yet—and yet—Oh, Mole, I am afraid!' And then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship."

There you have pure, contemplative prayer—nothing taken for granted and at the same time absolute security; absolute security in God and yet nothing taken for granted. Oh, yes, I am afraid and I am not afraid. And that runs through the life of St. Francis as a kind of theme, a theme which, as it developed in him, brought him to the point of total self acceptance. This, I think, is probably the most difficult thing in the world to do—to accept oneself totally. Most of us, when we look inside, rummage around in the bag of our existence and find it singularly unattractive. We think there's not too much in this, that it's worth nothing. There's never a more ungracious thing we can do than that; for he has loved us first, and that is what we learn in the process of contemplative prayer. That is being with God because he's God, not asking for anything or saying anything but being with him because he's God. And you slowly learn: "You know, you're loved first dearest. It has nothing to do with what you do, and in any case what you do really is quite irrelevant. It flows from my love in the first place." And slowly that is brought home to the inner self, the conscious part of our existence grasping that it is accepted without qualification. That is what eventually is heard.

That is what I'm certain St. Francis of Assisi heard on Mount LaVerna. St. Francis was a bit odd, you know, psychologically. Frankly, I think he was a manic-depressive. He used to go into the most awful fits of depression and then pull himself out of it. Just before he went up to Mount LaVerna, he suddenly thought he was damned, an awful sense of emptiness. Then he pulled out of it and went off to LaVerna and there had that extraordinary experience where what in fact was already true inwardly became true outwardly—the marks of the stigmata were put on his body. What he grasped was the truth of total self-acceptance, because, in fact, he recognized that he was accepted by God. There, in that experience of identity with the suffering Christ, he totally and utterly accepted himself.

Once, when he and Pacificus went into a church, Pacificus fell asleep because St. Francis was so long at prayer. While asleep Pacificus had a vision. He saw heaven opened and there in heaven a throne that was empty. He asked whose throne this might be and the reply was given: "It was the throne of Lucifer who fell through pride and it is now reserved for the Blessed Francis because of his utter humility." And coming out of the dream he said to St. Francis: "What do you think of yourself?" St. Francis said: "I am the greatest sinner in the world." And Pacificus said, "Oh dear. There are robbers and thieves and murderers. How can you say this?" And Francis replied: "Pacificus, there is not in this world the greatest sinner who, if he had received the graces that I have had, would not be ten thousand times better." You see, Francis used the superlative, "the greatest sinner," in the sense of unique; he was the only one. You know how somebody who loves someone might say, "My dearest Mary." But see, you don't mean that you are the thirty-sixth Mary starting

with "Dear Mary" then "More Dear Mary" and "Dearer Dearer Mary" and then eventually "Dearest Mary." No, it doesn't mean that, does it? It's the use of the superlative that means unique. And so he used it of himself. He judged himself, not by anyone else, but by a relationship with Christ. And in that judgment he condemned himself, but nevertheless heard from God the total acceptance of himself which in fact was manifested finally on Mount LaVerna.

Now, if there is ever to be a reform, the Church will never, ever reform itself again by division. Never! The Church has learned from its experience. On that Monday, July 16, 1054, when Cardinal Humbertus a Silva Candida threw down the bull of excommunication on the high altar of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and said to Caerularius the Patriarch: "Take it or leave it," the Patriarch said: "We will leave it. And you will leave too, and you will get safe conduct to the walls of Constantinople and from there on, dearest, you're on your own." And so the cardinal came back to Rome and there was the great and terrible division of East and West. Then on October 31, All Hallow's Eve, 1517, Martin Luther posted his theses; and in 1538, in England, the Church was divided again. After that there was a gradual splintering and splintering and splintering until we now have something like three hundred and sixty versions of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This has served only to divide people one from another as the mission of the Church has gone on from Europe.

Never again will the Church be reformed by division. It can only be reformed by integration. And the reform which is integration starts at the depths of the individual believer. That's what I believe St. Francis stands for. And if the medieval world and the world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries could have heard the message that was in this man, perhaps there would never have been the splintering that we've seen happen. So much of what Martin Luther said was right, there's no doubt about that. At least two-thirds of Luther's doctrine is now accepted by the Roman Catholic Church; two-thirds of Luther's outlook is really our own. But in the end the Church was divided. Now I don't say Luther is alone responsible; Catholics were responsible as well, as Paul VI said at the opening of the Second Vatican Council. He begged forgiveness, indeed, for the part that the Roman Catholic Communion had played in the division of the Body of Christ.

But in the end, the sixteenth century renewal was a failure because it divided the Church. Whoever was responsible, it divided the Church. St. Francis seems to rise above all the divisions that are sectarian. There are Franciscans in the Catholic Church, there are Franciscans in the Anglican communion, there are Franciscans among Lutherans, there are Franciscan movements of renewal all over the world. The Order is itself dedicated, according to the principles and ideals of St. Francis, to the goal of Christian unity. Francis cuts through all the fluff and all the icing and all that seems to be simply superficial

and goes to the heart of the matter—and that is to love our Lord, to love the risen Savior.

Is that not the case when you think of it? Everything that we believe as Catholics comes from the doctrine of the Resurrection, whether it's about Our Lady, the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, whether it's about the primacy of the Pope, or whether it's about the seven Sacraments. It is all derived from the doctrine of the Resurrection. Everybody in the Christian Church believes the doctrine of the Resurrection. And as a corollary, they believe in the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If they don't, then they don't follow the gospel. They might be very holy and good and saved and more saved than we are, but they cannot have the name "Gospel Christian." A gospel Christian holds the triune God and the Resurrection.

Why aren't we defined by that? Why is it that when we are identified as people who follow the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, somebody gives us a tag that has nothing to do with the gospel? Isn't it true? Roman Catholics used to be defined as those who go to Mass on Sundays and take fish on Fridays. The Anglicans are in union with the Archbishop of Canterbury and rather odd. They are three sorts of different groups: high, low, and middle. Lutherans—oh, well, you know, Martin Luther didn't like Rome, called the pope the "Whore of Babylon." And the Methodists—they don't like drink; and the Presbyterians—they don't like dancing; and the Baptists—they're all rather grim. Why is it nobody ever says of us: "Oh, yes, they're the people who believe in the Resurrection? Oh yes, they're the people who believe in hope." Nobody ever says that about us. Why?

There's something not right. I myself am absolutely convinced that until the followers of the gospel of Christ are identified by the doctrine of the Resurrection and the doctrine of the Holy Community of God, which is the Trinity, we will get absolutely nowhere with Christian unity; and we will we get absolutely nowhere in our plans for the future of the world. Now this man Francis had the doctrine of the most Holy Trinity and the doctrine of the risen Savior, the Incarnate Lord, at the center of every single thing he did. And isn't it strange that he speaks precisely because of that? Francis was a Catholic; you can never pretend he was anything else. Yet, he can speak to the Anglicans; the Muslims know about him; the Hindus know about him; the Buddhists know about him—everybody seems to know about him. And yet they may know nothing about the gospel and they may know nothing about the Church.

What they grasp is that in this man's life, holiness proved to be the source of the most authentic humanity there is. Holiness makes a person utterly and entirely human—from above, not by our efforts, but by divine grace. And his life was striving to follow in the footsteps of somebody else, which is what he did; he never wanted to be original. He never, ever wanted to be a founder or have his named blessed, and he must be sitting in heaven scratching his head

now thinking: "What are they doing this for, talking about me?" Yet his following in Christ's footsteps produced absolute originality. His slavish imitation of the doctrine of the gospel produced utter and absolute originality, so much so that it speaks outside the confines of the Catholic Church, indeed, of Christianity, to other religions and to all humanity.

And that's what I think renewal and reform is all about. That's what I think being a Church in ruins is about. And I learned it from him; I've said nothing that is mine. I've learned it from St. Francis. It is not necessary to be divided from our brethren to renew the Church. That's what he says to the sixteenth century, to all the Catholics and to the Protestants as well—you do not have to divide the Church or be separated from one another to renew the Church. Indeed, it is against the will of Christ. And he says it to our time—it is not necessary for you to look askance at the people who believe something other than you do, or the people who haven't the same mental or cultural outlook as you've got. You don't have to be divided from them, for there is something deep down underneath it all that unites everybody. It's called the grace of fundamental brotherhood/-sisterhood. He considered everyone his brother who loved the Lord Jesus, the Crucified Christ.

If that could be made the principle of the Ecumenical Movement, then I fancy we would be able to dispense with many commissions and many hours of discussion and many papers delivered and published. Not that they are irrelevant, but they would be unimportant. Francis loved our Lord to such a degree that wherever he found others who loved the Lord, he rejoiced and loved them; for isn't it natural that when you love someone, you wish that everybody else should love this person as well? For love has no ending. And that is most of all like the love of God. John Duns Scotus says that God first of all loves himself, and then he loves himself in others, and this love is most ordered, a love that has no selfishness. God so loves himself that he would like the rest of us to love him as he loves himself. That is how he shares what he is. Scotus, you know, apart from being Scottish, was a very learned Franciscan; but everything he said he got from somewhere in the writings of St. Francis of Assisi.

So you see, conversion in the end is inseparable from growth in holiness. And holiness is none other than a process of trying to reach integrity. And integrity is the splendid union of what is interior and exterior. What appears in our words and what is in our minds, what comes from our eyes and what is in our hearts, are one. And that kind of integrity is the source of peace, and peace is the tranquillity of order, as St. Augustine says. And where there is peace there is always loveliness and beauty, and beauty is the splendor of order. And where there is loveliness and beauty there is always excellence. And that in the end is God's eternity.

And I believe that the grace of the Lord Jesus which St. Francis saw throughout the length and breadth of creation and which he appropriated so beautifully in his own life is in the end the only real means of reformation and renewal for the Church in any age. The Church in our time has gone through a metamorphosis. It is now in the throes of a little bit of joy and a little bit of sadness. It is suffering and it is growing and it is looking towards the future. Would to God that what St. Francis stood for, namely the brotherhood/sisterhood revealed in Christ Jesus, were the inner dynamic of everything that we're doing and everything we want to do. Were it so, then I think the sufferings would decrease considerably and peace would enter into the holy Church; and peace in the holy Church would be the greatest possible gift that we who believe could give to the human race at this moment.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Grahame, The Wind in the Willows (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), 117-8.

"On [Christmas] day Francis wanted the poor and the hungry to be filled by the rich, and more than the usual amount of grain and hay given to the oxen and asses. 'If I could speak to the emperor, I would ask that a general law be made that all who can should scatter corn and grain along the roads so that the birds might have an abundance of food on the day of such great solemnity, especially our sisters the larks.' He would recall, not without tears, what great want surrounded the poor Virgin on that day."



# "The Canticle of Brother Sun" A Theology of Creation

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# Sylvia Marie Gamberoni, OSF

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Throughout history, wide ranging approaches to and definitions of revelation have developed. The purpose and intent of this presentation is to focus on one aspect of revelation, namely, the experience of God in creation. An attempt will be made to concretize this theology by means of Francis's hymn of creation, "The Canticle of Brother Sun."

It is by our graced openness to creation that we come into relationship with other creatures and with our God. The converse of this is also true. William Reiser offers the image of Adam in hiding as indication that "fear has disordered creation." This seems a highly relevant image in an age characterized by multiple layers of alienation—one individual from another; social, religious, and political groups from each other; the individual from the group; and, perhaps most tragically of all, the individual from her/himself. Reiser maintains, however, that "being uncovered and totally open to God's view . . . is the basic condition of our creaturehood" no matter how far we have moved away from our reality. At our best, then, at our graced and open best, we experience the relational dimension of revelation in our human experience of creation.

The question might now be raised of what the probability is of our graced and open selves ever actually experiencing the Transcendent in creation. We may derive insight from considering Francis's lucid and transforming awareness of God manifested in creation. A close examination of Francis's view of creation—combining as it does both the unitive and the relational dimensions—will help to concretize the theological issues of revelation as experiences of creation.

The 1982 revision of the Rule for Third Order Regular Franciscans draws on Francis's own words to express the heart of his belief about creation:

The brothers and sisters are to praise the Lord, the King of heaven and earth, (cf. Mt. 11:25) with all his creatures and to give him thanks because, by his own holy will and through his only Son with the Holy Spirit, he has created all things spiritual and material and made us in his own image and likeness (Rule 3:10; cf. RegNB 23:1 and CantSol 3).<sup>3</sup>

The commentary notes that for Francis "the created world is the expression of God's goodness and the theater of his redemptive love for us." The sentence quoted from the Rule contains a wealth of insight into Francis's humble stance before creation. Of particular relevance is the use of the preposition "with" in the phrase "to praise the Lord . . . with all his creatures." Francis saw himself as intimately linked with the whole world of created entities, animate and inanimate. This horizontal, non-hierarchical relationship with creatures constitutes Francis's fraternal understanding of creation.

His link with creation provided Francis with a unique vision of the basic condition of a graced and open nature. Thomas of Celano notes that Francis

called all creatures brother, and in a most extraordinary manner, a manner never experienced by others, he discerned the hidden things of nature with his sensitive heart, as one who had already escaped into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God (1Cel 81).<sup>5</sup>

This fraternal link is also the key to a unitive vision that sees all created realities connected with each other and with God. This is not to say that Francis's view was pantheistic. "God would reveal Himself through things without being identical with them," a distinction Francis clearly grasped. The issue is not identification of God with created realities, but rather the stance Francis brought to creation. For Francis "the universe forms a whole, a unity, a marvelous arrangement that is not hierarchically erected but is determined by fellowship." This vision of the "basic unity of reality" left Francis with "a sense of wonder and mystery."

Nowhere in Francis's writings is his unitive vision and "sense of wonder and mystery" more beautifully expressed than in the hymn composed toward the end of his life, "The Canticle of Brother Sun." As we approach this work, it is essential to keep before us an idea not explicitly mentioned in the poem, yet nevertheless central to a complete understanding of it. "Fundamental to understanding Francis's creation theology is the notion that the Incarnation somehow involved the sanctification of nature." Francis's unitive vision, in fact, makes no sense apart from his belief in the centrality of Christ. Eric Doyle goes so far as to claim that, though Francis was not a theologian, he was "re-

sponsible . . . for a theological doctrine of the Son of God which, since the time of Duns Scotus, has been a distinguishing feature of Franciscan theology." Doyle sees the doctrine of the primacy of Christ as the "logical outcome of Francis's totally Christocentric mysticism." The fact that the Canticle makes no explicit reference to Christ does not negate this premise. In fact, in its absolute reliance on fraternal linkage, it does not need to refer to the mystery of Christ since "it is entirely penetrated by that mystery." 12

The context of Francis's life at the moment of his composing this piece is well known. Having received the stigmata the year before (1224) and being in a generally weakened condition because of a chronic eye disease that had plagued him for years, Francis was also suffering from deep depression. He feared that the Order was evolving in a way that betrayed his ideal of the "poor, wandering mendicants." In this depressed and weakened condition, he felt that even God had abandoned him, and he began to fear for his eternal salvation. In this state Francis experienced some kind of vision, a mystical experience in which he found assurance that he would enter the kingdom of God (cf. LP 43). It was the very next morning, according to tradition, that Francis composed what Murray Bodo calls "the swan song of one of the greatest troubadours of the Middle Ages," a song expressing the reality that "you find [God] when He finds you loving the world He has created and redeemed." 14

The Canticle, written originally in the Umbrian dialect and comprising the first notable contribution to Italian literature, is generally thought to have been composed in three parts.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not that is accurate, a consideration of the poem seems to fall naturally into three focus areas with the first one, stanzas 1-9, comprising the major portion of the poem. The first two stanzas (inspired by Rev. 4:11) provide an introduction and dedication. The next seven offer three pairs of elements with alternate titles of "brother" and "sister." The poem's very first words, "Most High," occur four times in the poem (1, 2, 4, 11). The upward movement "completely oriented to the transcendent" (1, 2) is followed, in stanzas 3-7, "by a horizontal movement of openness to brotherly communion with all creatures."16 The progression to this horizontal is, however, in a descending movement from the male image of Most High Lord to the female image of Sister/Mother Earth. Francis leaves, momentarily, the "Most High" with an awareness of the radical limits of humanity ("No mortal lips . . ." [2]). "Henceforth [Francis's] way toward the Most High will, paradoxically, be a way that leads from heaven to earth."17

In stanza 3 the phrase, "through all that you have made," introduces the concept of the role of mediation played by creation, a mediation impossible apart from Francis's profound fraternal relationship to all creatures. It is appropriate that the first element mentioned (3, 4) should be the sun since Francis "thought the sun the loveliest of God's creatures and most worthy of comparison with him" (SP 119). Doyle finds Francis's attitude representative of that of

the early Christians who believed the sun to be "created and endowed with a beauty which reveals something of the indescribable loveliness of its maker." Taking the elements to their symbolic heights, Leclerc sees the sun in the Canticle as an archetypal image, "a symbolic language for an experience which is inseparably cosmic, interior, and religious, since it puts the soul in communion with the world, the self, and God." 19

The moon and stars (5) are illuminations of the night, in contrast to the sun which is of the day. The moon, in particular, uniquely symbolizes human life in its continual fluctuations of growth and decline. The cycle of humanity's faces, which we daily encounter, "all share in differing degrees the radiance of Another, but always less than that Original, as the moon carries, but in a subdued way, the brilliant light of the sun." This shining by reflected light has the power to bring us home to ourselves in true humility. With Francis's vision of radical creaturehood, we see ourselves dependent on the Most High. The stanza on the moon also introduces the adjective "precious," a remarkable usage here since, as Leclerc notes, the adjective is used elsewhere in Francis's writing solely in reference to the Eucharist or to places where the Eucharist is reserved. Its use here and in stanza 7 is an indicator of Francis's attitude of reverence toward all of creation.

It is appropriate that stanzas 6 and 7 be considered together in view of the fact that "in poetic and religious meditation on the cosmic elements, wind and water are often closely associated." Scripture provides numerous examples of this (cf. Gen. 1:2; Ex. 14:21-22). Wind and water, in Francis's usage, also provide contrasting images of action on the part of wind and pure being (with no verb of action) for water. Wind here is the "Creator's fellow-worker, the one who 'cherishes,' that is, supports, strengthens, and invigorates other creatures." Doyle further sees wind, which is "formless yet capable of entering into the finest crevice of any being" as "a symbol of God's grace." Water, in our Christian tradition, is powerful with imagery of new life and finds its place in many of our rites and blessings. Here water is described with the second use of "precious," providing a sacred image connoting "an inward openness to the sacred," and an atmosphere of pure and lovely stillness.

Stanza 8 introduces an image of particular majesty in Brother Fire. Francis possessed an extraordinary devotion to fire, <sup>26</sup> a devotion explained by "his recognition of it as a symbol of God." The Church expresses also this recognition in, for example, its use of a sanctuary lamp in places where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved and in the central place of the new fire at the Easter Vigil. Leclerc sees both the external and interior symbolism of fire as something which touches persons interiorly and provides also an image of God, of "life-giving and creative power." <sup>28</sup>

The journey from heaven to earth is completed in stanza 9. Earth is both Sister and Mother, linked inextricably to our creaturehood as the work of God

and generative once she is created. "The Earth Mother is the origin and paradigm of all parturition, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. And in one or another of these senses we are all mothers." It is appropriate that the earth should be chosen to end the seven-stanza rendering of the elements. Francis's celebration of Mother Earth effects a "reconciliation of the supernatural, the natural, and the human."

In this sense the poem leads naturally into the stanzas on pardon and peace (10, 11) regardless of the presence or absence of an objective historical event occasioning them. "The Canticle shows itself to be the song of a man who is fully reconciled and at peace in his relations with others and with himself, even in 'sickness and trial.'" The unitive dynamic of revelation is operative throughout this "charter of peace." Francis is at one with all creation, a oneness that elevates his mind and heart, that unites his very self with the creative, lifegiving God present in all of creation.

It follows logically that a person so reconciled could welcome Sister Death (12) as she approached. Francis's total openness—Adam out of hiding—enabled him freely to embrace death in an attitude completely opposed to one of sinful obstinacy (13). Sin, according to Leclerc, consists of "the closing in of the conscious self upon itself and its individuality. . . . A man who thus cuts himself off from Being is spiritually dead." Francis's vision of creation and his total reliance on the Creator led him to "praise," "bless," and "give . . . thanks" (14). In this final stanza, we can hear a kind of sending forth for all of us who need to find ways of incorporating Francis's vision of creation into our ongoing efforts to discover God in our world.

# Conclusion

Through our human experience of creation, we come to an awareness of God's self-communication. Our Judeo-Christian heritage is filled with natural imagery proclaiming the wonder of a self-revealing God. The Spirit of God enables us to enter into relationship with the world of creatures in a bond of kinship that is radical and complete. Francis's exquisite poem, "The Canticle of Brother Sun," is a particularly striking representation of the relational view of creation leading to union with the Creator. The theology of creation—and Francis's unique vision of it—leaves us with an abiding hope in a world "charged with the grandeur of God," a world where "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things," a world over which the Spirit of God "broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings." <sup>34</sup>

#### **Endnotes**

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>William E. Reiser, *Drawn to the Divine: A Spirituality of Revelation* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>2</sup>Reiser, 17.

<sup>3</sup>References to the Rule are from *The Rule and Life of The Brothers and Sisters of The Third Order Regular of St. Francis*, with commentary by Margaret Carney, OSF and Thaddeus Horgan, SA (Franciscan Federation, 1982). References to the writings of Francis are from *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Regis Armstrong, OFMCap. and Ignatius Brady, OFM (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>Rule and Life, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>References to the early biographical sources are from St. Francis of Assisi: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis, ed. Marion Habiger (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup>Build With Living Stones: A Program of Study on the Franciscan Missionary Charism, Correspondence Course on Franciscan Missionary Charism, 1989, 12/6.

<sup>7</sup>Build With Living Stones, 12/6.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Eric Doyle, OFM, St. Francis and The Song of Brotherhood (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 5.

<sup>9</sup>Timothy Vining, TOR, "A Theology of Creation Based on the Life of Francis of Assisi," *The Cord*, 40 (April, 1990): 102.

<sup>10</sup>Doyle, 60.

<sup>11</sup>Doyle, 60.

<sup>12</sup>Eloi Leclerc, OFM, The Canticle of Creatures, Symbols of Union: An Analysis of St. Francis of Assisi, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), 35.

<sup>13</sup>Murray Bodo, OFM, *The Way of St. Francis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 146.

<sup>14</sup>Bodo, 144-45.

<sup>15</sup>According to traditional belief, stanzas 1-9 were written soon after the mystical vision; stanzas 10-11 were written to help settle a dispute between the bishop and the mayor of Assisi; stanzas 12-14 were written as Francis saw death actually approaching. According to Habig some question this assumption regarding sequence of composition. The "Mirror of Perfection" and "Legend of the Three Companions," which record the three-part composition, may be legends. Also, no record has been found in Assisi's archives of a quarrel between Bishop Guido and the mayor. Cf. Marion A. Habig, "Francis of Assisi: Writer, Supplement to the Omnibus of Sources on St. Francis," in *Omnibus*, 1920.

<sup>16</sup>Leclerc, 30.

<sup>17</sup>Leclerc, 30.

<sup>18</sup>Doyle, 72.

<sup>19</sup>Doyle, 71.

<sup>20</sup>Doyle, 82.

<sup>21</sup>Leclerc, 76.

<sup>22</sup>Leclerc, 91. (Francis writes of "Wind and Air," perhaps not recognizing wind as air in motion.)

<sup>23</sup>Leclerc, 95.

<sup>24</sup>Doyle, 97.

<sup>25</sup>Leclerc, 106.

<sup>26</sup>Because of this great devotion, Francis once refused to help put out a fire that was burning his cell on Mount La Verna, a stance that helps to explain the following caution: "It must be remembered that modern rational thinking will never be able to fully understand the behaviour of Francis" (Build With Living Stones, 12/4).

<sup>27</sup>Doyle, 109.

<sup>28</sup>Leclerc, 115, 127.

<sup>29</sup>Doyle, 121.

30 Leclerc, 158.

31Leclerc, 171.

<sup>32</sup>Doyle, 138.

33Leclerc, 181.

<sup>34</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 66.

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# Francis of Assisi: Harbinger of a New Medieval Radicalism

# Séamus Mulholland, OFM

[A lecture delivered to the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1997.]

# Introduction

There is perhaps no other saint in Christendom who is as popular or as much loved as Francis of Assisi. Most people at least know the "bare bones" of his story: that he was rich, he gave it all away, became poor. Most people know that like some medieval Dr. Dolittle he spoke to the animals and called the trees, stones, sun, moon, and stars his brothers and sisters. One wonders whether this is enough to justify the attraction that he has for so many people. Though many centuries have passed since Francis's death, he continues to exercise a powerful fascination over and attraction for millions. And these are not just Christians of every denomination, but also men and women who would claim to have no faith whatever and whose culture radically differs from our own.

What then is the attraction of Francis of Assisi? How is it to be explained? How does a little man from thirteenth-century Italy who seems to have been rather unattractive physically gain the admiration of so many people for so long?

Medieval historians, specialists, and experts would tend perhaps to approach Francis as a footnote in medieval history, whether it be social or ecclesiastical. They might try to determine his place and importance within the context of the massively shifting upheavals of the thirteenth century, that time of great development and liberal humanism in arts, music, and poetry. I, however, must approach Francis of Assisi as one who found him attractive enough and his ideals and vision challenging enough to change my lifestyle completely. Before joining the Franciscan Order I was a nightclub bouncer and a bodyguard. I risked everything for what many today would consider a worthless venture, and even while in that venture, have been the butt and point of other

people's accusations of hypocrisy, compromise, and betrayal. Yet myself and thousands like me follow St. Francis of Assisi as our constant and guiding inspiration for living a life today based on the experiences and vision of a thirteenth-century itinerant, mendicant preacher who turned medieval society and Christendom on its head.

### Francis of Assisi: Who Was He?

It has always been the case throughout the history of the Franciscan Order, that while many despise the friars (for example, Chaucer has a few harsh words to say about them since he was fined five shillings in the fourteenth century for beating a friar up), Francis has always been deemed "untouchable" and beyond reproach. Yet, who was this little man? He was not especially learned. He did not have an extraordinary education. His handwriting (as we know from manuscripts available to us) was barely legible. His head was filled with all sorts of romantic notions of the "sacred call of knighthood," but he soon learned the brutality and the horror of war. Francis fought for Assisi against Perugia in 1202 at the battle of Collestrada, when Assisi lost the flower of its youth. He was imprisoned for nearly eighteen months before being ransomed by his father.

But this experience of the horror of war did not deter him from setting out for battle once again in 1205, this time to fight against Apulia. But he never got there. Near Spoleto he turned back along the way he had come; something had happened to him which medieval hagiographers would call a "revelation." We do not know what happened, but we do know that up until that moment he had been a rather fastidious young man, fussy about the company he kept, and that he was the leader of a group of youths in Assisi who spent most of their time partying. He despised, hated, and feared the lepers who lived on the dark edges of his bright world. He found the poor who lived in the Assisian "shanty towns" a people to be ignored; after all, in the city archives they did not exist.

And yet, something happened to the young Assisian to change the whole course of his life radically, and with that change the course of the history of Europe. The once headstrong, party youth had a kind of spiritual earthquake, which shook him to the foundations of his being. What he had once despised and feared he now served, ministered to, learned from, defended, honored, and loved.

# The Times in Which He Lived

I have titled this paper "Francis of Assisi: Harbinger of a New Medieval Radicalism." By "radicalism" I do not mean that Francis was some kind of

socio-cultural revolutionary or that he exhorted the people of his era to change the face of the world in which they lived. It was already happening and happening fast. Rather, I mean that Francis of Assisi, by his own life as both example and witness (which incidentally he never forced on anyone), called people to return to the root (radix) of the truth of their own lives in a world which was developing, growing, and moving fast—culturally, socially, economically, and politically:

The thirteenth century was a period of structural disintegration. Feudalism and the Holy Roman empire were beginning to shatter. A new and critical period was dawning upon Europe (and beyond). The thirteenth century saw the emergence of a new and powerful group, the independent townspeople, the "commune." This group made up a new class in society comprised of tradespeople, craftsmen, and merchants. They were inspired by new ideals and the spirit of democracy. They were a powerfully mobile group, and with a money-based economy threatened the security of land tenure. But quite aside from its spirit of democracy and free enterprise economics, this developing class had new requirements in the areas of ethics, spirituality, and religion.

New states were emerging in Europe. They were taking on new societal and human aspirations, structurally in conflict with the older forms of religious or feudal power-based authoritarianism. The ancient framework of the "City of God" on earth was rent asunder by the titanic clash of the two most powerful upholders of that very structure—the Empire and the Papacy.

Besides the powerful wrangling of Church and State was the development of new forms of economy, trade, and socio-political aspirations as well as cultural and artistic development. With the emergence of a new people, there came a new culture which was ushered in with the development of the *romans*, the language of the new romantic. It was the time of the *cardias*, the courtly love novella, the diffusion of the cycles of Arthur and the Round Table—ideology which sacralized the aspirations of knighthood and chivalry. It was the time of the great heroic epics—the Song of Roland, the Chansons de Gestes. The creative movement flowered. Its poetry, music, and song were at once shocking, challenging, inventive, creative, and dynamically beautiful in the intensity of their sensuality and true eroticism. It was the time of the Troubadours.

Into this ferment Francis was born. Within it he came to maturity. In the truest sense Francis was both a product of and a contradiction to these two worlds. In his romanticism he harkens backs to the age of feudalism and the nobility of knighthood. Between the fading splendor of the Empire and the unstoppable rise of the new European nations, he stood as a bridge. In the decline of Latin, the language of the learned and powerful, and the rise of the vernacular, Francis embodied the "schizophrenia" of his age—the constructive though radical aspirations of someone born of the new commune and the

dreaming chivalry of a sun-golden age now tarnished to a low burnt-orange of autumnal fading. He both personified and linked two eras and reflected all the contrasts of that transitional century.

# The Church and the Papacy

But while there was great flux and change within society and culture, the medieval Church itself was not standing still. In 1198 Innocent III ascended the Papal throne and ushered in with his pontificate a period in which the Church reached the zenith of its temporal power and influence. Innocent was undoubtedly one of the most powerful popes, a statesman and consummate politician, a skilled orator and user of persuasion. In the history books Innocent is remembered for his political ruthlessness rather than his pastoral activity. But he did try to bring order to a period of great religious change. He addressed the demands being made by the poverty-reform movements that were the precursors of Francis. Innocent was especially successful in returning the Humiliati to the Church.

A jealous guardian of the Church's rights, however, Innocent was ruthless in the persecution of those he considered to be the Church's enemies—whether from within or without. The sack of the Cathar stronghold of Beziers and the subsequent fall of Carcassone are indicative of what Innocent was capable of when his patience was finally exhausted. They were also indicative of the struggle for peoples' hearts. Yet Innocent never deliberately obstructed any grace moving within the Church. It was he, one of the most powerful men on earth, before whom Francis and his few companions knelt to seek permission for their way of life and from whom they received it.

The medieval Church, still feudal in its structure and mentality, had taken steps toward independence from civil power. Yet it remained deeply secularized. The monastic form of life inaugurated by Benedict had given shape to European society, combining as it did stability of place with a regular pattern of liturgy and work. There was a symbiotic relationship between the monk and the monastery—the monk gave all he owned to the monastery, including his labor, and in return had his spiritual and temporal needs met while subject to the control and authority of the abbot. Yet here too there had been attempts at reform. The great movements of Cluny and Citeaux had offered two interpretive visions of Benedictine life within the context of monastic reform—Cluny with its emphasis on liturgy, art, intellectual and social influence; Citeaux directing itself towards austere living, perpetual silence, subjective piety, and simplicity. But even the monasteries still clung to feudal structures. As a result, they were distant from the people.

The institutional Church, too, was far from the people. Under Innocent III it primarily occupied itself with the struggle to subordinate temporal au-

thority to the spiritual authority of the Church, personified in the person of the Vicar of Christ. The people saw a Church that spoke to them from a great height, a Church they could not hear because it was so far away from the clamorous reality of their own real lives. The Church could not and would not listen to the people because it heard only its own voice clamoring against the shifting sands of the society and the world in which it found itself. Its ears were deafened by the constant brutal battles it found itself having to wage.

# Francis at the Crossroads

By birth Francis belonged to this age of uncertainty. He belonged to the new society that was being thrust into the medieval world—the new society made up of craftsmen and merchants, one of whom was his own father. But his idealistic chivalric heart kept him in touch with the old feudal atmosphere—the heroism of the chansons, the striving for perfection through the ideals of knight errancy: courtesy, loyalty, bravery, pity for the weak, and defense of the defenseless.

In forsaking the intensity of opportunity this newly emergent world was offering him, Francis was not making any negative statement of rejection. Its preoccupations were not what was truly in his heart. He had always remained an idealistic romantic, but an idealistic romantic who lived the ideals that had inspired and motivated him. He never lost the deeper values of knighthood, and, while others condemned the Church, he did not. The only judgment that Francis made on the medieval Church was one of love and loyalty. He condemned no one, not even the rich, and to suggest otherwise is to misunderstand and unjustly misinterpret Francis of Assisi's attitude toward poverty. He was as happy in the palace of Guido, Bishop of Assisi, as he was in the shanty towns of the poor.

Francis condemned no one but was in all aspects a vir Catholicus, a Catholic man. He was Catholic in faith and Catholic in vision and outlook. His vision was all-embracing, universal. It was not limited to, nor could it be contained within, the confines of a monastery; nor was it maintained by brute force of arms. In the Sacrum Commercium, the Lady Poverty asks Francis to show her his friary. Taking her to the top of a mountain he shows her the world and says "This, Lady, is our friary." Francis was no critic of the Church; quite the opposite as his writings attest. He was simply himself. He experienced the truth of the society in which he found himself but lived his life in such a way as to suggest that beyond the dehumanizing lure of money, power, and wealth there was a freedom which existed if only it was searched for.

The age in which he lived was preoccupied with itself. It waged war with itself and with others. It justified violence in the name of whatever God people called upon, whether it was the Father or Allah. At the battle of Damietta in

### A New Vision

There is a brute simplicity in Francis of Assisi and a single-minded purposefulness in his absolute refusal to allow any deviation from the path upon which he believed God had set him and upon which, through him, others had also been set. When founding his way of life, he did not draw inspiration from earlier forms of religious life as expressed in the rules of Benedict or Augustine, and he resolutely refused to countenance doing so. He ignored the monastic concept of stability, nor would he allow his Order to be confined to houses. In 1223 he gathered all the friars together at Assisi that they might discuss and share their experiences and contribute to the upbuilding of the movement. It was an exercise of the democracy with which Francis had grown up. It had never been heard of that *all* the members of a religious movement should come together to discuss openly and freely issues related to their way of life.

Francis's every instinct was with the ideals of freedom and democracy, openness and receptivity, willingness to listen and to hear. It was challenging in its immediacy and radical in its vision of the future. While Innocent had approved his form of life in 1209, Francis did not need anyone to tell him what his way of life should be. He knew what God had told him, and he would not allow alien patterns to be forced on him regardless of where they came from and the ecclesiastical power behind them. Francis was radical in that he followed his instinct—it was this same instinct which allowed him to follow the gospel, which also allowed him to find a place and a role within the fractured social and religious world of his time and to be a rock within it.

For Francis of Assisi the medieval world did not present him with disappointment or drive him in exasperation to undertake a *fuga mundi*. It did not mean for him to shut himself away behind the high walls of a monastery. Rather, the way of life which was divinely revealed to him was offered gratuitously to the society that surrounded him, and it was offered within that society and not apart from it. To the new powerful townspeople, Francis of Assisi offered the truth of Christian conversion and a living penitential presence.

In the earlier Rule of 1221 and in the later Rule of 1223 and in some of his other writings, Francis makes it clear that, unlike the monks, his friars will live among the poor. They will become part of the social reality in which they find themselves by working for their living. They will pray with the Church and they will preach in the vernacular. And while those around them who are emerg-

ing as the new arbiters of society are victims of their own lust for gain, the friars would display detachment—most particularly from money.

Here is Francis of Assisi's new radicality. Here is his harboring of a new concept, not just of religious life, but of medieval life. In his own life he reflected the longing that was deep within the religious aspiration of his time for a true return to gospel values. These values had characterized the poverty-reform movements which had gone before him, but many of them had fallen into conflict with the Church. Francis differed strongly from them by his non-negotiable refusal to condemn public wrongs, with his message of peace and good for all; and he differed strongly from them also in his submissive attitude and filial obedience to the Church of Rome, its bishops, and its clergy. The writings of Francis are replete with the constant call to the friars to obey the Church.

The movement he inspired was something daring and something new, a new religious movement which was markedly different from any previous monastic institution or the poverty-reform movements that had gone before. While Francis's movement was based on a return to apostolic poverty, there was also the concept of brotherhood/sisterhood and a radical preferential option for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the outcast, and the lost. For Francis of Assisi there was no tension with this way of being in the medieval world and the medieval Church. The tension rather arose from those who, faced with the radical challenge of the newness and freshness of Francis's way, could not quite meet it.

# A New Radicalism

Thus we may say in all truth that Francis of Assisi is a harbinger of a new medieval radicalism. The life and vision he chose and offered to the world and the Church of his time was not one chosen and offered in scorn, contempt, or criticism, nor was it chosen as a rejection of nature as impure. Francis never wished to leave the world nor did he wish his followers to do so. On the contrary he wanted to be immersed in it without being of it.

The major force in western European history has been the rise of the city. While some were condemning the cities as places sunk in vice, corruption, decadence, filth, and all kinds of depraved lust and vanity, others were moving in different directions. Innocent III had founded the hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome to take in foundling children. A parish priest in Paris was working to rehabilitate prostitutes. At Toulouse the Cathar heresy was raging, and at city fairs usury was wreaking havoc with the people.

The instructions of Francis were clear. He put his followers into cities, not at the centers but rather at the edges. The proto-Franciscan communes lived on the outskirts of the cities where the poor lived. These were strange

and new times and as such they needed strange and innovative solutions to their difficulties. The monasteries sprawled over the countryside and owned much of it. The city spawned new wealth that flowed from the new commune with its trading and crafts. It was here that Francis placed his begging itinerants—among the humble and the deprived (without neglecting the others!).

While Francis of Assisi was a harbinger of a new medieval radicalism, he is also relevant to our own times. Predating the call of the Second Vatican Council by seven hundred years, Francis maintains the paradoxical elements of the Christian Gospel and not only reads the signs of the times but responds to them in the light of a "return to the sources." In this sense we can say that there is a twofold dimension to the new radicalism of Francis of Assisi—it is at once Christian and social.

Here lay his originality and radicalism—he opened up a way of being religious in the world at a time when the Church was at the summit of its temporal power and wealth. In the religio-social movement he founded, there were to be no positions of dominance or precedence. Brotherhood became the central tenet of his movement. This is the key to understanding his impact on the middle ages and on the centuries which followed, for he insists on a new nonnegotiable quality of relationship. The spirit of association that characterized the communes is found in Francis of Assisi, but thrown into stark relief against the background of his world is his response to a gospel inspiration.

#### Conclusion

I would like to conclude by offering the following reflection. The cries for justice, tolerance, and peace that clamored from the poor in the world of St. Francis are still being voiced today. We need a new radicalism of brotherhood/sisterhood, both proclaimed and lived, if those cries are to be given ear today. This is why Francis still commands respect and ever will. Franciscan life today is not lived in the thirteenth century but in the post-modern era of the decaying embers of a century that has seen two world wars, the death camps, the detonation of the atomic bomb, the slow, agonizing extinction of thousands of species of animals and plants, and the disruption of the very heavens with the erosion of the ozone layer. In his own time Francis rejected the power of ecclesiastical prelacies, the feudal wars, the butchery and savagery of the Crusades. He did not want abbatial paternalism and stood against all forms of domination.

Francis was a man both of his time and beyond his time. We are the products of the post-modern age, and as we move towards the new millennium perhaps we do so full of doubt and fear. Fear makes us wary and uneasy. So too was it in the time of Francis of Assisi. Yet we also stand on the edge of greatness. We do not know if we as a species can achieve the glory that is possible

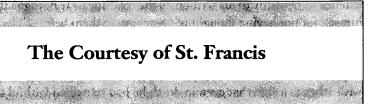
for us. If Francis of Assisi has anything to teach us as we take these tottering steps towards the year 2000, it must be that every aspiration for justice, peace, tolerance, and integrity in a single-minded devotion to an original inspirational ideal is worth a life.

For those of us who are Christian, it may be following in the footsteps of Christ more closely. For others it may be the discovery of radical forms of life which are equitable and just and which respect the dignity of creation and humanity regardless of race, creed, or culture. Francis judged no one but sought to embrace the truth of the world that confronted him. Perhaps this is the real legacy he has left us—a non-judgmental involvement with the dirt and the mire of this world in all its aspects so that by involving ourselves in the reality of creation we may better perceive and understand the Mystery within it.

# Mirror of Christ

How oft o'er Umbrian slopes, through dusty lanes with shepherd's staff he trudged in sandaled feet. Men peering in those sunken eyes beheld The flash of living fire and felt its heat: Forgot in that brief glimpse this bauble earth. The tinseled things of time. with tawdry sheen, And God-ward turned their thoughts yea, dared to dream perhaps in truth 'twas Christ that they had seen. Why strange this likeness to his Lord, when he So tightly clasped the Cross, its nails pierced through Frail hands? To wounded love so close he drew the soldier's lance found not one heart, but two.

Allan B. Wolters, O7M



## Donald DeMarco

The term "courtesy" derives from the word "court." A "courteous" person, according to the etymology, behaves in a manner befitting a prince. "Courtly love" is a romanticized version of sexual love in which the woman is greatly idealized and ardently pursued. It originated among the French aristocracy in the late eleventh century, but soon spread into neighboring countries through the poetry and music of itinerant romantics called troubadours. Manuals known as "Courtesy Books" advised aspiring young "courtiers" in etiquette and other aspects of behavior expected at royal or noble courts. They helped to elevate "courtship"—the implementation of courtly love—to a highly refined art.

At the same time, there were certain ambiguities about courtly love, as specific cognates of the word "courtesy" clearly attest. A "courtesan," that is, a woman attached to the court, was a prostitute; but a "curtsy"—the word "courtesy" reduced to two syllables—was an elegant gesture of respect. Courtly love in all its aspects is dramatized in the legends of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Sir Lancelot's tragic love for Lady Guinevere is the archetypal embodiment of this form of romantic desire. But as in the case of Lancelot and Guinevere, one of the less respectable features of courtly love, given the prevalent Medieval practice of marriage for convenience, is the idealization of adultery.<sup>1</sup>

# Francis and the Ideal of Courtly Love

Francis of Assisi was greatly enamored by the ideal of courtly love and the songs of the troubadours. He gave them, however, a Christian interpretation. He took the courtly notion of courtesy and gave it a fresh countenance which glowed with Christian charity.<sup>2</sup> For Francis, courtesy became the respect one was prepared to show in the presence of anyone. He was especially fond of expressing this value to the less fortunate members of society. For Francis, the poor, the sick, and the neglected were his brothers. "Whoever may come to us," he said to his disciples, "whether a friend or a foe, a thief or a robber, let him be kindly received." He knighted all humanity and then, with an almost reckless enthusiasm, began addressing all God's creatures with the honorific

titles of brother and sister. He praised Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wind and Sister Water. According to the legend, his "little brethren the birds" listened so devoutly to his sermon by the roadside near Bevagna that he chided himself for not having thought of preaching to them before. The special Lady whom this gallant and exuberant troubadour chose to court was Lady Poverty. He pursued his Lady ardently throughout his life and, when he was dying, requested that his body be stripped naked, laid on the bare earth, and sprinkled with ashes as a sign that even in death he had remained faithful to her.

Francis was courteous to all of God's creatures because courtesy, in his view, was the younger sister of charity and an attribute of God—"La Cortesia e una delle proprieta di Dio." "God Himself, of His courtesy, gives His sun and rain to the just and the unjust." Francis would surely have applauded what Hilaire Belloc was later to say about courtesy:

Of Courtesy, it is much less Than courage of heart or holiness, Yet in my walks it seems to me That the grace of God is Courtesy.<sup>5</sup>

Francis took the straitened notion of courtesy as sung by the troubadours and gave it a breadth that made it co-extensive with the cosmos. He understood that royalty was not limited to aristocracy; it was an essential feature of every created thing. All of creation stood before his eyes as one vast royal court. He had taken the word "court," which in Latin originally referred to something closed (cors, cortem—an enclosure for cattle) and opened it up to the far reaches of the universe.

For Francis, courtesy is the glad tribute each pays to each in recognizing the likeness of God in every soul. It is the light of God which confers upon his human subjects a nobility that is radically different from the nobility that members of the court believed they saw in each other. It is not blood, rank, privilege, or even virtue that makes people noble; it is their Creator. Francis restored the source of nobility and the justification for courtesy to God, whose Self is bound by courtesy to all souls who bear God's image.

# Commentary

Francis had a rich appreciation for the virtue of courtesy understood in its highest form. Even the small kindnesses and seemingly trivial considerations that are shown to others can lend a greater charm to one's character than the display of great talents and accomplishments. They can provide the gateway to firm and enduring friendships, and they can also provide the world with much needed warmth and wit. During one of his performances, pianist-comedian Victor Borge was handed a note which read: "Lauritz Melchior and Jean

Hersholt both at ringside." Borge responded with diplomacy and charm. "I rarely introduce big names from the stage," he said to his audience, "but in this case, since both visitors are old friends and fellow Danish-Americans, I made an exception. I have the privilege of introducing two great Danish artists. I honestly don't know in what order to introduce them," he continued, fearing that he might be discourteous to one or the other, "So I'm sure that Jean Hersholt won't mind if I mention Lauritz Melchior first."

Our contemporary world, however, so impressed as it is by the mere external show of things, has depersonalized courtesy, transforming it into a tool of commerce. Thus, we write courtesy notes, make courtesy visits, present courtesy baskets, pick up courtesy tickets, and switch on courtesy lights. We use courtesy phones, report to courtesy desks, study courtesy maps, receive courtesy titles, and are given the courtesy treatment to insure that we remain satisfied and steady customers. The courtesy industry is alive and well.

Just as a halo does not have far to slip in order to become a noose, courtesy—like any other virtue—does not have far to stray to become a vice. Courtesy can easily be nothing more than a shallow pretense, a vulgar display of hypocrisy. As Shakespeare writes:

How courtesy would seem to cover sin, When what is done is like an hypocrite, To which is good in nothing but in sight!<sup>7</sup>

Courtesy is a true virtue only when it has a personal depth that accompanies its outward show. One might find genuine courtesy in the most unlikely places, far from either the court of ancient kings or the world of modern commerce:

Shepherd, I take thy word, And trust thy honest-offered courtesy, Which oft is sooner found in lowly sheds With smoky rafters, than in tap'stry halls And courts of princes.<sup>8</sup>

Courtesy is paradoxical, but immensely practical. The courteous person assumes that every man is a gentleman and every woman is a lady, rather than wonder whether they are. It may be naive and gratuitous to make such an assumption, but it is remarkable how many people begin to act as gentlemen and as ladies precisely because they were thought to be worthy of these courteous titles.

The foundation for courtesy is the dignity of the human person. Courtesy is the appropriate response in recognizing the divine royalty in another per-

son. Graciousness, as its etymology indicates, is the release of loveliness, a quality that emanates from the person who is being gracious. Courtesy is the recognition of that quality in the other. In this regard, courtesy is something like love at first sight. It is sensing nobility at first sight and then acting in a manner consistent with that sense.

For Dante, this nobility is luminously evident to the souls in Paradise. In his *Paradiso*, two Dominicans—Dominic and Aquinas—exchange courteous and joyful tributes with two Franciscans—Francis and Bonaventure. Aquinas first praises Francis for his great love for Lady Poverty:

And unto her he pledged his wedded faith In spiritual court and before his father too, And loved her more each day that he drew breath.<sup>9</sup>

Bonaventure then extols Dominic as a great champion (paladin) and acknowledges that he as well as his company of saints are very much moved by the words of St. Thomas:

To emulous praise of that great paladin, The modest speech and glowing courtesy Of Brother Thomas moved me, and therein Moved all this fellowship to join with me.<sup>10</sup>

The courtesy which these saints display toward each other represents the gracious mutuality and harmony that exist between souls in Paradise. Courtesy is of divine origin and is shared by all who share God's Light. The implication is apparent: we begin to experience what heaven must be like when we sense in each other our divine nobility and respond with the proper courtesy.

#### **Endnotes**

# Frank Drollinger, SFO

[This is an edited selection of meditations from a series prepared originally for a monthly Fraternity newsletter.]

## The Goodness of God.

When we are attached to the things we have acquired and prize because of the exercise of our self-will, the things of God can appear of little value to us. At worst, the magnificent sunset or the grand displays of nature are mere backdrops, the scenery against which we pursue our own interests.

In the beginning, God's goodness was in the garden. That was not enough for us, and after our disobedience this goodness arose in the desert. We may have a nostalgia for Eden, but we find the grace of salvation in the wasteland. Within our oases the earth seems all we need. God's gifts often come in packages that are rather drab when they appear in the settings of earthly abundance. But when we make our hearts a desert in which we find poverty of spirit, only God satisfies us.

Francis had become so receptive to and aware of God's goodness that the less his food was earned the more he was grateful for it, because then it came directly from the hand of God. I think that Francis valued the sun so highly because he recognized his dependence on its pleasure, and it reminded him of God, Whose gifts cannot be purchased or coaxed from Him but which are absolutely free.

If we are self-willed, a gift from God can seem not enough, because we want more, as perhaps the nine lepers did. We cannot see that God comes with the gift. For God does not practice random acts of kindness. He does not make out checks to "cash." He makes them out to you and to me and to every beggar, thief, and saint, with our names right on them; and He signs them. And I believe He jealously waits for them to clear, to see where we have cashed them. I love the way Dante says it:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, "Courtly Love," The Allegory of Love (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Séamus Mulholland, "St. Francis and the Themes of Medieval Literature," *The Cord* (April, 1994): 117.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>The Catholic Encyclopedia, 6 (New York: Appleton Co., 1909), 227.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>The Catholic Encyclopedia, 6 (New York: Appleton Co., 1909), 227.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Hilaire Belloc, Courtesy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup>Eating Out," The Bedside Book of Laughter (London: Hazell Watson and Viney Ltd., 1959),

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Shakespeare, *Pericles*, i, i, l. 121.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>John Milton, Comus (1637), l. 321.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Dante, The Divine Comedy, "Paradiso," trans. Dorothy Sayers, XI, l. 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Dante, XII, l. 143.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>Dante, VII, l. 91.

The root of human virtue seldom bears
Like branches, and the Giver wills it so,
That men may know it is
His gift, not theirs.

(Purgatorio, Canto VII)

## **Profession**

The story of Christmas is one that we try to live all year round, putting into practice its lessons, especially the message of peace and joy which is brought to us by our Savior. It is never out of season. So also with the story of Scrooge, one of the myths of our civilization in the sense that when we refer to it there is instant recognition of what we are thinking about. The part of the Scrooge story that I like best is his conversion. This is a true conversion because it brings a radical change for the good and is accompanied by overwhelming joy and peace and burning charity, and it does not die out over time.

It comes entirely from outside himself. We know that we cannot convert ourselves—conversion is a grace from God. We prepare the way, we make straight His paths, but it is beyond our power to accomplish it. It is the very helplessness of Scrooge and the relentlessness of God's pursuit of him that make this a true conversion. It is occasioned by Jacob Marley's intercession for him. Marley is expiating his own sins in the process. While his heart is totally engaged in assisting his erstwhile partner's conversion, Marley's own actions are inspired and, indeed, permitted by God.

Scrooge's motive for cooperating in his conversion is, in the first instance, fear—fear of the bold intrusion of the supernatural into his tightly-held little world. As the experiences of the conversion progress, he is touched with compassion, both for others and for himself. By finally facing his own death, he comes to a self-love of the type the Gospels enjoin on us.

But there is also the strong likelihood that the experience of his earlier life, with its affections, loves, and privations, plays a great part in his being disposed to receive the grace of conversion. And it is this remembrance of the good parts of his life that began the process of washing away the meanness that had, over the years, encrusted his soul.

Scrooge professed a rule, so to speak, by embracing his conversion and all the elements he would henceforth live by; it was the rule of keeping Christmas. Soon new members of our Fraternity will profess the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. In doing this they will embrace a life of daily conversion. These thoughts about Scrooge are not meant to suggest any parallels between Dickens's character and our brothers and sisters. Rather, it is to point out that daily conversion, which can seem like sheer, boring drudgery, is in fact fraught

with the most piercing and beautiful increases in intimacy with Christ. The timing and frequency of these moments are not of our own choosing. As we rerun Scrooge on our VCR tapes, daily conversion renews and strengthens our own promises made at profession.

May all our brothers and sisters find their hearts' desire in responding generously to the call of Christ, which has been cultivated, nourished, prayed over, and constantly watched by our Holy Father Francis who has poured into our professions some of the revelations of the Divine Mercy that he himself experienced in his own conversion.

#### Franciscan Saints

Each year in January our Fraternity has a "Franciscan Saints" meeting. Each member picks the name of a saint from a hat. This holy person is then our special companion for the year. The saint is usually Franciscan, sometimes with a name that is hard to pronounce, which adds special delight to the event.

I think of this as our "heaven" meeting—we remember the promises of our Faith, we see some who have succeeded, and we celebrate their goodness and their joy. We're also warmed by their faults. We enjoy their company and their intercession. We listen to their stories. Many are called, but these are chosen.

We see similarities with what we experience in fraternity life, in our own families, in our fellow parishioners. There is a prayer in which St. Francis calls on every saint in heaven to thank God for us, since he deems them more able to express and convey our gratitude than we are. He addresses those who are in the calendar as well as those who are not. He invokes Old Testament figures and other saints, living and dead and still to come.

We pick from the same hat the names of our deceased relatives, friends, fellow tertiaries. We ask their intercession and try to follow their example. In celebrating saints we celebrate many of the people in our own lives. And we are encouraged.

Francis also warned us that we can allow a focus on the saints to take the place of the efforts we must make toward our own salvation. We can mistake our devotion to them for a satisfactory spiritual life. St. Francis de Sales makes the same point—we can mistake our pious thoughts and feelings for the real thing, a deep personal love of Christ and His Cross that causes us to be challenged into action by the Gospels.

There is a stirring scene from the life of St. John Vianney in which, in a loud voice from the pulpit and in front of his entire congregation, he orders St. Philomena not to perform any more miracles. On the grounds of the parish church there was a shrine to St. Philomena. Through Vianney's prayers she had been performing miracles among the parishioners. Vianney, who was

very devoted to her, was more devoted to the spiritual welfare of his flock. He saw that popular attention to the miracles was diverting the attention of the people from the need to live the faith in their own lives—something, perhaps, like what happened with the multitudes who were eager to have Christ feed them bread, but would have none of His teaching on the Eucharist.

Let this admonition not interfere with our camaraderie with those holy men and women in heaven who light up our lives. But let us see that the light comes from elsewhere—from Jerusalem where, says Bonaventure, God has established His furnace. The saints all point in that direction. Francis can show us around and teach us how to behave there. And Mary can show us how to get there.

# **Fraternity Chapter**

The early Franciscan friars gathered for their Chapters with a special enthusiasm. As the Order grew, few of them saw the founder regularly. Many had never seen him before. Now, at the Chapter, they might associate in person with Francis of Assisi.

We saw this same sort of excitement when Mother Teresa visited her convents. There was a real holiday atmosphere. One of the Spiritual Assistants of our Fraternity once asked me whether I thought that the sisters' enthusiasm was genuine. I said yes: it was just an elevated version of the way they lived every day. Her visits merely fanned the flames of a truly burning vocation.

One practical evidence of this showed precisely when Mother Teresa was present. While the laity who came to see and hear her were, for the most part, personally focused on her, the sisters related to her more as a community. In the crowd, an observor might have been absorbed in what she was saying and doing. The sisters, however, shared her presence with one another.

This is the difference between attending an inspiring event or admiring the holiness of another person and living a vocation. The Cure of Ars, from the pulpit, forbade the locally-honored saint from performing miracles in his parish. He felt that the wonders accomplished in her name distracted the people from the one important focus they needed—the Presence and Mystery of the Eucharist.

Mother Teresa's Order shows how the early friars might have acted. Chapter was not a spectacle or an administrative update. True, Francis was there; and true, information was received, rules were explained, elections took place, and assignments were made. But there must have been a tangible sense that God's work was being dealt with and that those present were called by name to do this work with the particular community there assembled. And they were called to this by God through Francis.

When I think that Francis is present at every Chapter, including the ones we ourselves celebrate, I look to how I am living my own vocation. As in every other commitment I have, I know that I am in danger of taking my calling for granted. The cooling of a vocation is not obvious; it is often imperceptible.

At the 1995 Chapter of our Province of Saint Mary, Sister Mary Dolor Orowski, made some comments on the nature of our vocation. A few of her points are worth repeating here:

- We need to reinvent the Franciscan way of life in our own lives; to rethink our purpose and our ideals. Our Franciscan way of life is one of continual growth, so it really cannot stay the same. The life within our vocation either changes or withers.
- When we allow God to love us, we are renewed. The Eucharist images Christ within us and is the source of our strength.
- The evil we face is too great for us to deal with. We have chosen to live a commitment. We need to remember why we became Franciscans.

Our novice instructions told us that no one follows Francis in isolation. The Chapter is a good way to get back to this truth. Francis was continually going back and starting over. I think we ought to do no less.

#### Franciscan Service

Charles Dickens, in one of his novels, shows us an English ladies' charitable society that sent red velvet waistcoats to the hot jungles of nineteenth-century Africa to be worn by the village boys. Dickens was satirizing a type of service work that is more concerned with itself than with the true needs of its intended beneficiaries.

Most of us recognize that it is important to serve others. So many people cannot live decent lives without help. But all of us live in a society so complicated that we regularly need assistance from those willing to lend it.

We have, more and more, a service economy, but we seem to become less and less true servants. Some of us choose to give others the help we think they need. Alternatively, some of the "service" we have in our society is really the services of professionals or "resource persons." (When these are not readily available we resort to manuals for Dummies!)

Service workers, who ordinarily choose what they do, are not usually true servants. Servants direct their attention to a master and do his bidding. For Christians, servanthood has a twist, in that we are the Master's friends, not His slaves.

For Franciscans there is another twist—we do not seek out the service; it seeks us out. It grows on the vine within the Order. The Master approaches us

as a beggar, and we become servants through love and loyalty. Franciscans also have another angle—they share the hardships of others; they spend time with those needing help.

We do not live as our own masters, and we do not die as our own masters. What a strange thing it is, then, when we, called to be servants, can want to dictate the terms of our service. Even Francis, whose Order is named after him, could not have his will in all the particulars of how the Order was run. Indeed, he felt that in one of the very essentials—absolute poverty—the leadership was going in the wrong direction.

There is the service that I choose, and the service that is offered to me. The Capuchin First Order priest, St. Leopoldo of Mandic, had a burning desire to be a missionary. But his poor health kept him in his friary, where he spent forty years in the same cell, hearing confessions through a small window cut into the wall. Pope John Paul II called this cell St. Leopoldo's mission field.

Service of the Franciscan sort brings us understanding of stewardship, which sounds like such a nice idea but has its difficulties. While stewardship may be appealing in its exercise, it can be a problem for us to let go of our assigned services. It is one thing to say, These goods or this talent aren't mine; they are entrusted to me; and I use them for the honor and glory of God. It is another thing to say, I am no longer the steward for the honor and glory of God. Another will exercise that role now.

These things may actually seem funny to those who serve our Fraternities. There are precious few who are waiting to replace Ministers, Vice Ministers, Secretaries, Treasurers, Directors of Formation, or Purveyors of Refreshments.

It is not the work itself that attracts, but the One who is served. There are those who serve the poor, or the sick, or anyone who needs help, or some cause or idea. And then there are those who serve the Lord. When we serve some particular group, we can become discouraged or uncharitable. We can burn out or, worse, become fanatic. We can see our work as the *only* important work. But when we serve the Lord, we do His work. The irony is that it may be the same work, but the difference is that the plan we follow is His, and our expectations are not part of our baggage. As passionately as we may desire to assist others in need, we put the outcome in God's hands.

"[Trancis's] compassion for the Child [Jesus] flooded his heart and made him stammer words of sweetness after the manner of infants. His name was like honey and the honeycomb in Trancis's mouth." (2 Cel 199)

# **Book Review**

Madeline Pecora Nugent, SFO. Saint Anthony: Words of Fire and Light. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1995. Pp. xxvii, 408.

Nugent presents a vibrant and imaginative account of the life of Anthony of Padua through the eyes of those who knew him. She narrates the life of Anthony by dividing his story into five parts. The prologue begins the narrative with the description of a cardinal's doubt concerning what he believed to be the premature canonization of Anthony, which took place within a year of Anthony's death in May 1232. In part one the author returns to the beginning of Anthony's ministry and follows him from Lisbon to Coimbra, to Morocco, and finally to Forli, where the friars discover his great preaching ability. Part two treats of Anthony's mission to Italy, including his teaching theology to the friars in Bologna and first encounters with heretics. Part three chronicles his mission to France and his engagement of the Cathars. Part four describes his return to Italy, his preaching to the papal curia, his participation at the general chapter of 1230, and his role as a member of the delegation of friars sent by the chapter to request of Gregory IX an interpretation of the Rule. Part five concludes the narrative with his final Lenten preaching in Padua, his move to Camposampiero to complete his Feast Day Sermons, his death at Arcella, and his appearance after death to Thomas Gallus at Vercelli.

Each of the five parts are sub-divided into chapters which locate Anthony in a particular time and place through the eyes of a character recreated from historical and/or hagiographical information. Thus, the story of Francis's appearance at Arles while Anthony preached to the friars gathered in chapter is told through the eyes and mouth of Friar Monaldo. Anthony's involvement in the governance of the Order is told through the eyes of Elias in the tumultuous events of the general chapter of 1230. And the death of Anthony is described through the experience of Brother Roger, who, together with Brother Luke Belludi, was his companion in the final days. Each of these chapters provide an intimate and moving portrait of Anthony as a real person come alive through the feelings and thoughts and encounters of the narrator. The author supplies chapter notes (found at the end of the text) which indicate the resources used to recreate each of the characters and the occasions. A short bibliography concludes the work.

Nugent has done significant research into the historical and hagiographical aspects of Anthony's life and times. She supplements the paucity of information concerning Anthony's interior life and the content of his preaching by

taking the English translations of his Sermons and, expanding on them somewhat, interspersing them throughout the narrative to provide examples of his teaching, as well as of his inner thoughts and feelings. She partially explains her method in the introduction. There she writes: "Biographers during Anthony's time recorded few personal details about their hero. Later writers fleshed out his history, but how accurately? I have had to decide what to include" (xvi).

While the chapter notes provide information on sources, nowhere does Nugent provide information concerning how she arrives at her decisions concerning the "facts" she presents in her reconstructed narrative. She seems to equate rather loosely "history" and "hagiography" and "historical record," without recognizing the limits of these categories. This becomes problematic especially in reconstructing relationships for which there is little historical evidence or detail to begin with, such as the relationship between Anthony and Elias, or even between Anthony and Francis—in both cases she goes well beyond what evidence suggests. While Nugent does admit that "Where details and characters were missing, I have supplied them in an imaginative way and indicated this in the chapter notes" (xvi), she leaves the reader with the impression that everything else is authenticated by the sources when this is not necessarily the case.

This book is clearly the work of a person with a great love of Anthony of Padua. It is written with a clear and engaging style, with the conviction that St. Anthony has a powerful message for our own day. It is a devotional book that must be read on its own terms, as an *imaginative* reconstruction of the life and times of Anthony of Padua and not as a historical reconstruction of his life and times, despite the authors use of "historical" sources.

Michael Blastic, OFMConv. The Franciscan Institute

"The birthday of the Child Jesus Francis observed with inexpressible eagerness over all other feasts, saying that it was the feast of feasts, on which God, having become a tiny infant, clung to human breasts. . . . When the question arose about eating meat that day, he [said]: . . . 'It is my wish that even the walls should eat meat on such a day, and if they cannot, they should be smeared with meat on the outside.'"

(2 Cel 199)

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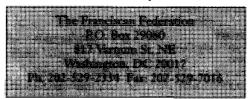
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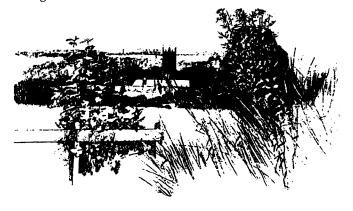
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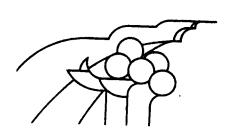
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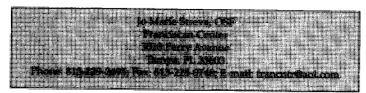
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## **Biographical Profile**

Gedeon Gál, OFM, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY, 34-35.

... [Francis] felt that it was discourteous to be in the company of anyone poorer than oneself.

(Kenneth Clark, Civilisation [New York: Harper and Row, 1969], 76)

# ON THE FRANCISCAN CIRCUIT COMING EVENTS

#### Saturday, October 31, 1998

Facing the Christ Incarnate. Rose Margaret Delaney, SFP, and Ann Amati, OSF. 8:30 am - 4:00 pm. At Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, 399 Fruit Hill Ave., North Providence, RI 02911. Contact: Marie Bernadette Wyman, OSF, 49 Jackson Ave., Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706, ph. 914-478-3930.

### Saturday, November 7, 1998

Facing the Christ Incarnate. Mary Catherine Gurley, OSF, and Kathleen Uhler, OSF. 8:30 am - 4:00 pm. At Franciscan Center, 49 Jackson Ave., Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706, ph. 914-478-3930. Contact: Marie Bernadette Wyman, OSF.

# Saturday, November 21 - Sunday, November 22, 1998

A History of the Third Order Regular, part 2. Roberta McKelvie, OSF. \$100.00. At Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, 444 Woodvale Ave., Staten Island, NY 10309; ph. 718-984-1625. Contact: Rose Margaret Delaney, SFP.

#### Saturday, December 5, 1998

Rebirth of a Charism. At Stella Niagara, NY. Franciscan Federation. (See ad p. 315.)

# Friday, December 11 - Sunday, December 13, 1998

Christmas with Francis: Greccio Revisited. Joseph Markalonis, TOR. At Franciscan Spirit and Life Center, Pittsburgh, PA. Contact: Mimi DiGregory, 3605 McRoberts Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15234; ph. 412-881-9207.

# Monday, January 18 - Friday, January 22, 1999

Franciscan Evangelical Life. Joseph Chinnici, OFM. \$200. At Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, 444 Woodvale Ave., Staten Island, NY 10309; ph. 718-984-1625. Contact: Rose Margaret Delaney, SFP.

# Monday, January 25 - Friday, January 29, 1999

Third Order Rule History. Roberta McKelvie, OSF. \$200. At Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, 444 Woodvale Ave., Staten Island, NY 10309; ph. 718-984-1625. Contact: Rose Margaret Delaney, SFP.

# Sunday, January 31 - Friday, February 5, 1999

Franciscan Gathering XIX. Maka Ina, Mother Earth: Black Elk and Francis. With Marie Therese Archambault, OSF, and Wayne Hellman, OFMConv. At Franciscan Center, Tampa (See ad p. 320.)

# Monday, February 1 and Monday, February 8, 1999

**Psycho-Sexual Development.** Violet Grennan, OSF. \$100. At Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, 444 Woodvale Ave., Staten Island, NY 10309; ph. 718-984-1625. Contact: Rose Margaret Delaney, SFP.



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