

Franciscan Theology Today: Its Possibility, Necessity And Value

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Possibilità, esigenza e valore di una teologia
Elaborata da Francescani oggi

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What does doing theology mean for a Franciscan today?¹

These are important realities, they are the root of a history, a tradition, a collective consciousness typical of the individual branches of the First Order, which are now called to be present in the Church as Franciscans in their autonomy and in the wake of their centuries-old tradition. They are also called to develop a Franciscan theological thought of their own, starting from and looking at *their specific tradition* and form of Franciscan presence in the church.

Keeping this in mind, from now on when I speak of Franciscan theology as a theological reflection to be carried out as a task by the Franciscans, though intending Franciscan in the general sense, I am aware—and I want it to be kept in mind—that the term is applied to the different branches in different senses, because of their past and present diversity. Their common source of inspira-

¹At the very beginning I want to clarify the meaning that I intend to give here to the term "Franciscan." Beyond historical questions and centuries-old controversies, in part still alive today and to be recognized without anxiety, there is "Franciscanism," there are the "Franciscans," there is the Franciscan Order, etc. However, in addition to the three Franciscan Orders, there have also been, for centuries, three separate branches (families) of the First Order with their autonomous way of life, therefore with their own sensibilities, traditions, values, legislation, models of behavior and "social images." Thus there is the generic term "Franciscan" extended to the three orders, there is also the generic term "Franciscan" which is extended to the three branches (families) of the First Order inasmuch as they are tied, more or less directly, to a single Franciscan experience, that of the origins. Concretely speaking, there are the Conventual Franciscan, the Franciscan of the Observance (Reformati, discalced-Alcantarines, Recollects, today the Friars Minor, etc.), and the Capuchin Franciscan. That is undeniable historical reality; just as undeniable historically is the reality that each one of these branches has its own history, tradition, culture, and traditional attitude toward the problem of study, even though today in this regard there is a kind of reversal of the original positions.

tion obviously leads all the Franciscans of the First Order to focus on common theological and spiritual values; however their different specific traditions lead them (and should consciously lead them), for objective reasons, and not from fatuous parochialism, to different emphases on these values. Can the Franciscan family, through the work of its members who are devoted to theological research, make an original and distinctive contribution to this area of ecclesial life and thus, in a broader context, to contemporary culture?

The quick and easy answers are more or less known. For some, the answer is obviously yes. Usually they are thinking primarily of the past, of the great Franciscan theological tradition as a legacy of ideas and insights that are still valid and should be propounded once more by Franciscan theologians today. For others, a negative answer is more plausible. There are a number of reasons for this, some of which will be considered later. They are based on the conviction that theology is a single reality and that it can and must be done with no reference to the fact that those doing it belong to a religious order.

Both of these spontaneous and unreflective answers are partially true. But precisely because they are spontaneous and unreflective, they do not force us to face a problem that, unless clarified, will continue to lead to ambiguities and lack of interest. At most, they will lead us to an interest that is uncritical, unreflective and thus for the most part sterile.

The question is this: what is the meaning of a Franciscan theology done by Franciscans today?

1. *Meaning of the expression "Franciscan theology" and state of the question of the existence of a Franciscan theology today*

During the last few years the question of the existence, possibility and meaning of a Franciscan theology has been raised by scholars from all the Franciscan families.² I think it is worthwhile to recall briefly the positions of those who have attempted to solve it. But before doing this I think that it is indispensable to recall a distinction that is being made in theological writings between "theology by Franciscans" and "Franciscan theology." The two expressions can indicate, and in fact do indicate, two different realities.

Theology by Franciscans means the theological work done by the members of the Franciscan Order down through the centuries. Their work has so

²See H. J. Lauter, "Franziskanische Theologie für unsere Zeit," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 33 (1970) 1-5; J. Lang, "Gibt es heute eine franziskanische Theologie?" *Franziskanische Studien* 57 (1975) 37-46; G. Iammarrone, "Possibilità, senso e compiti di una 'teologia francescana' in se e per il momento attuale," in *Miscellanea Francescana* 78 (1978) 339-56; A. De Villalmonde, "Es que necesitamos una teología franciscana?" *Estudios Franciscanos* 87 (1986) 683-718.

clearly set them apart in the history of Christian theology that they have been and are still called the Franciscan school. Like other theological currents, they are marked by and known for a certain body of thought, theological perspectives and characteristic doctrinal theses that are clearly delineated.³

Franciscan theology means the theological work carried out in the course of time, and in different cultural settings by the Franciscan family or the order as a whole. Of course, the different branches of the order have had their different emphases, given the diversity of their traditions and modes of presence in the church and society. The order has done this work in the past (and to this extent Franciscan theology is the same as "theology by Franciscans"), but it is called even more to do it in the present and future. Franciscan theology is a dynamic reality that is in the process of becoming, continuous, yet also discontinuous with the past. Thanks to it the different branches of the Franciscan Order are at work and effective in the church and the world even today.

Having made this distinction, we must pose another important question: In addition to theology by Franciscans, (which is an indisputable historical and cultural fact), is there also a living, working, Franciscan theology, which is influential today, and has prospects of being influential in the future?

In the past few years, a number of Franciscan scholars have tried to answer this question. I think it is worthwhile to recall briefly the stimulating conclusions they have reached.

The German Friar Minor H. J. Lauter dealt with this question several years ago. Although his article was not very long, it was very dense and met with widespread approval.⁴ Lauter began with the fact that there has been an historical Franciscan theology which has its distinctive doctrinal points and is still relevant today. He found its central core in the piety of Saint Francis and his Christian experience. Essentially this means in the humble and condescending love of God for creation in Jesus Christ.⁵ Lauter suggested that Franciscan theology today needs to express in modern language those things from its past that are essentially related to St. Francis's central core.⁶ He

³See especially W. Dettloff, "Franziskanerschule," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, IV, Freib. in Br. 1960, cc. 285-88.

⁴Cf. *ibid.*, 1-5.

⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 4.

⁶On this core, seen however as a fundamental intuition lived and articulated by the Saint of Assisi, cf. the splendid study by A. Gerken, "The Theological Intuition of St. Francis of Assisi," *Greyfriars Review* 7:1 (1993) 71-94.

concluded by maintaining that theoretical and practical reference to this central core in the present context could be a source of true Franciscan "continuity" and of valid and meaningful theological reflection by Franciscans today⁷

His presentation was followed by that of another German Friar Minor, J. Lang⁸ He denounced the "miserable" state of "sterility" in Franciscan theology. In his opinion, this is due to many factors, not the least of which is the indifference of the Franciscan Order to studies. He pointed out that we do not do Franciscan theology simply by frequently and accurately quoting the great masters of the medieval Franciscan school. Instead, faithful to the spirit of the St. Francis and with spiritual vitality, we must compare the great themes of the time with the word of the Gospel, and set up a dialogue between them⁹ He concluded that Franciscan theology must work in the present, while maintaining an essential connection with the witness and the thought of the man from Assisi. Since his thought and witness are better known and studied today, they can offer a powerful stimulus to the development of a more vital Franciscan theological reflection, whose spirit is not extinguished, but glows like fire under the ashes¹⁰

I have also addressed the question in a 1978 article in *Miscellanea Francesca*. There I tried to indicate that it is possible and even necessary to develop a Franciscan theology for our time, and I tried to outline its meaning and tasks.¹¹ I will briefly recall here what I wrote in that article. This piece, written for a specific occasion, is meant to be a more in-depth study of its content.¹²

My reasoning was based on one fundamental idea: a Franciscan theology in a true and organic sense can be realized only within the Franciscan Order. Only there does it become meaningful and carry out its specific task of Franciscan theological reflection.¹³ This is because the Franciscan Order is

⁷Cf. *ibid.*, 76.

⁸J. Lang, "Gibt es heute eine franziskanische Theologie?" *Franziskanische Studien* 57 (1975) 37-45.

⁹Cf. *ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰Cf. *ibid.*, 46.

¹¹Cf. G. Iammarrone, "Possibilità, senso e compiti di una 'teologia francescana' in se e per il momento attuale," *Miscellanea Francescana* 78 (1978) 339-356.

¹²The occasion was the International Assembly of Conventual Scholars of Philosophical and Theological Sciences, held in Rome at the Pontifical Theological Faculty of St. Bonaventure (the Seraphicum) from June 22 to 25, 1978. The two studies are very similar in approach and content; in the present one there are clarifications, specifications and an updating that permit it to be considered a more in-depth version of the first.

¹³Cf. *ibid.*, 344.

the social group which by its particular form of life within the church is able to produce that form of spiritual and cultural activity called Franciscan theology. Theologians who are not members of the Franciscan Order can obviously adopt individual values from the spiritual legacy of St. Francis and his order. But they cannot develop a complete platform of doctrinal positions inspired by the witness of the man from Assisi, because this presupposes a social body that lives in harmony with Francis and his spiritual legacy.

I formulated my own definition of Franciscan theology in these words: Franciscan theology is a theological reflection made by Franciscans in their relative historical, cultural and ecclesial context; it is inspired by the Christian and gospel experience of St. Francis of Assisi; and it is enlightened by the values lived and developed intellectually by the great historical and spiritual tradition of the Franciscan Order.

This definition includes three essential structural elements:

- a. Francis's Christian gospel form of life, which is both the founding element and the constant term of reference for a theology done by Franciscans.
- b. The Franciscan Order at its present moment in history and in its present ecclesial and social setting.
- c. The entire tradition of life and thought in the Order, which is the locus in which Francis's charism has been preserved and concretely expressed in critical dialogue with the changing cultural and social conditions of the different periods in history.

I went on to say: "A Franciscan theology that does not contemplate these three components, harmonize them, discuss them, clarify them and take a position on them, would seem to be impossible."¹⁴

I concluded by saying that such a theology does not actually exist, for various reasons. The main reason is that the Franciscan Order as a social organism is not distinguished within the church by a specific profile or form of presence, one that is truly characteristic and nourished by the charism of the founder.¹⁵ Moreover, the theology done by Franciscan scholars is not sufficiently attuned to St. Francis's form of life, especially with minority, under-

¹⁴Cf. *ibid.*, 345.

¹⁵A similar judgment on the situation of the Franciscan Order is given by M. Conti with reference to the new Constitutions of the three Franciscan families of the First Order: cf. "Il Messaggio Spirituale di San Francesco d'Assisi," *Le Grandi Scuole della Spiritualità Cristiana*, edited by E. Ancilli, (Milan, 1984) 347-420; 420.

stood in the fullest sense and realized in its deepest Christological and theological foundation.¹⁶

My presentation, the salient points of which I summarized above, was followed in 1986 by a treatment of the subject by A. De Villalmonde, a Spanish Capuchin. His article bore the very significant title "*Es que necesitamos una teologia franciscana?*" [Do We Need a Franciscan Theology?].¹⁷ The author summarized Lauter's and Lang's positions as well as mine, saying that he substantially agreed with them, and that he wanted to contribute toward overcoming the above-mentioned crisis. The question he raised in the title of his article was aimed at the core of the issues surrounding present-day Franciscan theology. He observed that any discussion on Franciscan theology that wants to do more than provide information and actually involves a plan and a commitment to revive it, must be influenced by the answer to this question¹⁸

I consider Villalmonde's formulation of the question and his line of reasoning very important for the treatment of the subject and I will summarize them here. They gather together the pros and cons that can be (and actually are) advanced and that command respect when this subject is under discussion today. Sometimes these are in an intuitive form, and sometimes they are well-articulated.

Why raise the question of *need*? Because, Villalmonde says, it leads to the heart of the problem. As he rightly says: "If this need does not exist or is not strongly felt, every attempt to create it will be, figuratively speaking, mere *speculation*."¹⁹ Obviously this is not a question of a necessity of the metaphysical order, but simply of whether the Franciscan community, in light of (*de cara a*) its own identity and mission in the church and in society, needs a *Franciscan theology* (emphasis on both terms). It is clear that the word "need" has various connotations here: a meaning, a reason for legitimating, or the concrete conditions giving it an opportunity to arise.²⁰ It is also obvious that the question of need does not arise when "Franciscan theology" means the theology historically done by Franciscans. Franciscan theology in this sense does exist. The question of need refers to Franciscan theology in the making (*in*

¹⁶Cf. *ibid.*, 351ff.

¹⁷Cf. A. De Villalmonde, "Es que necesitamos una teologia franciscana?" *Estudios Franciscanos* 87 (1986) 683-718.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 692.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 693.

²⁰Cf. *ibid.*, 693-94; cf. also my "Possibilità, senso e compiti di una 'teologia francescana' in se e per il momento attuale," *Miscellanea Francescana* 78 (1978) 339-56."

fieri), still to be done, a task or "*desideratum*" for the relative historical moment, for today and for the future.²¹

To give an answer for today, De Villalmonste follows the scholastic *quaestio* with its *videtur quod non* and *videtur quod sic*, marshaling the arguments for both sides.

Let us look first at the arguments for the *videtur quod non*:

1. Contemporary aversion to theological schools, theological "schoolism." There is a feeling in the air that the famous and glorious theological schools of the past have, for one reason or another, had their day.²²

2. The fact that scholasticism, to which Franciscan theology can be linked in large measure, has lost its prestige. True, we are interested here in a dynamic Franciscan theology, one which still needs to be achieved. But its connection to a glorious scholastic past can not be underestimated.

3. It is said that Franciscan theology, at least in its roots, is too tied to the Mediterranean and Western culture, and that it has become corrupted by provincialism. In our time, when theology is acquiring truly universal and ecumenical dimensions, we have to wonder what sense it would make to develop a Franciscan theology nurtured on the great Mediterranean-Western tradition of Franciscan theology.²³

4. Present theological method is very different from that of the past, to which a modern Franciscan theology would be linked to a great extent.²⁴ Theology today has been saturated with awareness of history and perspective. The golden age of Franciscan theology lacked critical awareness in its approach to and reading of the sources. Such an awareness would have to be an essential point of reference for an up-to-date Franciscan theology.

5. We must also take into account the loss of systemization and theological hegemony in our culture. Along with this goes the loss of dogmatic pre-conceptions in the reading of the Bible, including a Franciscan reading of it.²⁵

6. We should not underestimate the resistance within the Franciscan Family to the development of a Franciscan theology. There is a long history in this regard, one that is constantly repeated, filled with uncertainties, reservations, opposition, and the rejection of studies, theological studies included.²⁶

²¹Cf. *ibid.*, 694.

²²Cf. *ibid.*, 695-97.

²³Cf. *ibid.*, 699-700.

²⁴Cf. *ibid.*, 700-701.

²⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 701-702.

²⁶Cf. *ibid.*, 702-703.

In all the branches of the Franciscan Family—some more and some less for historical reasons—there is the largely unconscious tendency not to recognize that studies are needed for the life and witness of the Order.

Here are the arguments for the *videtur quod sic*:

1. The objections that relate to the so-called scholasticism or medievalism of Franciscan theology obviously pertain to the whole Catholic scholastic tradition, and almost certainly more to the non-Franciscan schools. On the other hand, if the objections are valid—and here I am clarifying De Villalmonste's thought a bit—they apply to historical Franciscan theology or to theology by Franciscans. They do not apply to the theology that the Franciscans have been called to develop creatively in the course of time, or to the theology that contemporary Franciscans are called to develop at this moment in history.²⁷

2. Plurality in theology is accepted today, as we will see presently. Thanks to this, it is permissible to consider the validity of a Franciscan theology as a theological reflection with a profile and direction of its own, even in the context of contemporary theology.²⁸

3. Today's better historical and critical tools allow us to obtain a more accurate knowledge of the great Franciscan masters (Bonaventure, Scotus) as well as the spirituality of St. Francis himself. These same tools allow us to develop Franciscan theology as a theology with its own particular emphasis.²⁹

After weighing the pros and cons, De Villalmonste believes that the positive arguments are stronger and prevail. For this reason he concludes that the Franciscan Order ought to display its vitality by creating a culture and theology of its own, which must serve as a light to its path. Finally he too insists on the presumed connection between the Order's form of life (*forma vitae*) and form of mind (*forma mentis*) if a genuine Franciscan theology is to arise.³⁰

De Villalmonste had earlier touched on the theme of Franciscan theology in 1985,³¹ not in terms of its methodology and epistemology, but of its content. He pointed out the values and ideas that a living and dynamic Franciscan

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 703-704.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 705.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 707-708.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 708ff.

³¹ A. De Villalmonste, "Contribución de la teología franciscana a la teología del futuro," *Estudios Franciscanos* 86 (1985) 702-755.

theology, enlightened, of course, by its glorious past, can bring to theology today.

This survey of recent works devoted to Franciscan theology shows that there is a felt need to clarify the concept of Franciscan theology itself. There is a tendency to distinguish Franciscan theology of the past, or theology by Franciscans, from dynamic Franciscan theology, which is a product of the relative historical moment. There is also an awareness that an active and dynamic Franciscan theology is more of a desire than a reality.³² There is recognition that within the Franciscan family there is at least inertia, if not an actual attempt to curb intellectual commitment to theology within the Order. On the other hand, there is a stress on the intimate connection between form of life and form of mind, or cultural and theological activity. One cannot exist without the other; the absence of the one damages the vitality of the other.³³

In addition to introducing us to the theological crux of the problem and the conditions required for the development of a Franciscan theology, this survey has, I believe, also provided us with some important epistemological elements. It is a good idea to pull these together, expand and complete them. They can give useful directions for drawing up a theoretical framework. They can also suggest practical options for contemporary theological reflection with a typically Franciscan character.

2. *Presuppositions of a Dynamic Franciscan theology*

a. *The Franciscan Order as Locus and Subject of Franciscan theology.*

Those who have dealt with the theme of Franciscan theology have especially emphasized the close relationship between the Franciscan Order (in its various branches with their respective traditions) and Franciscan theology. There is a process of osmosis or interpenetration between the Franciscan form of life lived and witnessed by the Order and the form of mind produced and created by it, the latter being a specifically theological cultural elaboration. Until a few years ago insufficient attention was paid to this very important

³²We must recognize, however, that during the past few years we have been moving toward it. Think of the numerous studies that have been accumulating for some years on subjects such as peace, ecology, the beatitudes, the following of Christ, the mystery of God, creation, etc. In them the present is illuminated with the light that comes from Francis and from the Franciscan experience of the past: cf., among others: *Dizionario francescano*, edited by Ernesto Caroli, (Padua: Edizioni Messaggero), 1983; Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, translated by John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1982); J. A. Merino *Umanesimo francescano. Francescanesimo e mondo attuale*, Assisi, 1984; Idem. *Manifesto francescano*, Padua, 1987; Giovanni Iammarrone, *La testimonianza francescana nel mondo contemporaneo*, Padua, 1988.

³³I will go into this aspect in more depth in the following pages.

aspect of the question. No doubt the understanding we have gained today from cultural anthropology, the sociology of groups and of knowledge, coupled with a more lively historical consciousness, have helped us focus on this aspect. In the last few decades, contemporary theologians have used these scientific acquisitions to help us understand the origin, function and development of ideas and systems.

Franciscan theologians, or those dedicated to reflection on Franciscan theology, have also pointed out the following assumption: only from within the group, from within the Franciscan social subject, can a true and integral Franciscan theology be evolved.³⁴ At all levels—intellectual, reflective and critical—Franciscan theology should be seen as the cultural production of the group. At the level of understanding animated by the faith it is an expression of the group's life of faith, which is something real, complex, and rich in opportunities and ferment.

From this viewpoint Franciscan theologians (as well as philosophers, jurists, historians, etc.) should be regarded as the intellectuals of the Order. By working within it, they help it to become more aware of the meaning of its life and journey, and the reason for its presence and witness in the church and the world. They should not be an elite class of mandarins, nor should they regard themselves as such. They are called to be the *critical conscience* of their religious family, fully and humbly aware that they must place their critical tools at its disposal, so that it can live its life and witness with greater awareness. By the same token, they receive from the Order their roots, their position, and their lifeblood, as well as a sense of direction in their thinking and critical efforts.

This relationship and interpenetration between the Franciscan form of life and form of mind—analogous to that which occurs between ecclesial form of life and the theological-cultural moment—is the basic reason why we need a Franciscan theology that is dynamic, vital, moving and always open. The church, the People of God on its journey, is moving through time. Its reflection on the faith is an ongoing work of meditation on the problems that arise from this movement and on the perspectives that it opens up. In the same way the Franciscan Order is the family of Francis on its journey on the pathways of the world in ever-new historical situations. Its intellectual and critical reflection on this journey must be an ongoing meditation, a reflection on the new,

³⁴Cf. Giovanni Iammarrone, "Possibilità, senso e compiti di una 'teologia francescana' in se e per il momento attuale," *Miscellanea Francescana* 78 (1978) 339-356; also A. De Villalmonde, "Es que necesitamos una teología franciscana?" *Estudios Franciscanos* 87 (1986) 683-718.

unknown, and difficult things that arise, and on the perspectives that are opened up.

Here we can profitably apply to Franciscan theology the functions that B. Forte (with a happy choice of terms) attributes to theology in general with respect to the life of the church, the People of God on its journey. These functions are companionship, memory, and prophecy.³⁵

In their work, Franciscan theology and the Franciscan theologians accompany the Franciscan Order. They share its ecclesial and cultural journey, they count its heartbeat and pulse, they feel that they are part of the course of its life and vitally involved in its affairs.

Franciscan theology and Franciscan theologians also act as the critical memory of the Order of which they are an intimate part and with which they journey. By their studies they illuminate the present against the background of the past. By recovering the past and bringing it to the consciousness of the Order, they help it to keep alive the founding elements and the lofty values on which it has been nourished and on which it still lives—though often unreflectively. Perhaps, in large part, it no longer lives on them, or is in danger of no longer doing so. Studies by Franciscan theologians enable the Order today to nourish itself more fully and more consciously on these values.

Finally, Franciscan theology and Franciscan theologians exercise a prophetic function within the Order. A prophet is one who gives "orientations that anticipate the future" (B. Forte). These orientations enable others to journey towards the future, aware of where they are going, making courageous choices in harmony with their own identity and the signs of the times, and serenely confident in the face of the unforeseeable element in history.

These are the functions of theology in the church. Franciscan theology is called to exercise these functions for the religious family with which it journeys, remembers and looks ahead. Its task is one of discernment, of stimulating the Order to travel its own road in new situations, courageously, and in fundamental continuity with the past.

Seen in this light, theology within the Order cannot and should not appear isolated from its life, as if it were superfluous or useless. Still less should it appear to be destructive, as in the adage, "Paris has destroyed Assisi." Instead, theology should be an indispensable commitment that flows from the true life of the Order, a service which it needs (even if at times this need is not understood, valued or recognized by many of the brothers, including the

³⁵Cf. B. Forte, *La teologia come compagnia, memoria e profezia*, Rome, 1987.

superiors). Theology enables the Order to consciously nurture its effort of life and Christian witness within the church through the varied forms of Franciscan apostolate.

b. *Franciscan theology in the context of theological pluralism*

Clarification of the relationship between Franciscan theology and the Franciscan Order is still not enough to justify its existence and function. We must also clarify its meaning, its worth, and its rationale as a distinct branch of theological reflection, in the context of today's theological pluralism.

We have seen that this has become necessary today. The various objections raised by A. De Villalmonste under the heading of *videtur quod non* are important. They can be overcome only if Franciscan theology—not so much as a static historical entity, but as one that is dynamic and still to be achieved—can justify only if Franciscan theology—not so much as a static historical entity, but as one that is dynamic and still to be achieved—can justify itself in the context of the problem of theological pluralism.

I will tackle this question by recalling the substance and the conclusions of the contemporary debate on pluralism in theology. I will situate the problem of the legitimacy of Franciscan theology and the identity of its perspective in this context.

The plurality of theologies or pluralism in theology has been one of the most debated questions of the past few years.³⁶ The church has opened herself to history (diachrony) and to the different world cultures (synchrony) in order to permeate all peoples with the leaven of the gospel and enlighten them with its light. As a result, her theology has had to confront various systems of life and thought, and has had to express the uniqueness and unity of the faith in many languages.

This opening has given rise to the difficult problem, which Karl Rahner already clearly grasped in 1969: the need for a plural expression of the single truth of faith.³⁷ In fact, it was this opening that caused the largely monolithic

³⁶I will give only a few bibliographic citations: K. Rahner, "Pluralism in Theology and the Oneness of the Church's Profession of Faith," *Concilium* 46 (1969) 103-123; International Theological Commission, "Unity of the Faith and Theological Practice," *The Tablet* 227 (1973), 645-47; C. Vagaggini, "Pluralismo teologico," *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia*, Rome, 1977, 1150-66; C. Geffre, "Pluralità delle teologie e unità della fede," *Iniziazione alla pratica della teologia*, I. (Brescia, 1986) 121-46; the entire issue of *Concilium* n. 1, 1984, especially the contributions of P. Eicher and J. M. Tillard; J. Ratzinger, "La pluralisme; problème posé à l'Eglise et à la théologie," *Studia Moralia Academiae* 24 (1986) 299-318.

³⁷Cf. K. Rahner, "Pluralism in Theology and the Oneness of the Church's Profession of Faith," *Concilium* 46 (1969) 103-123.

neo-scholastic theological system to collapse and allowed a plurality of options, projects and theological developments to enter Christian theology, especially Catholic theology. Because of this, we have seen the rise of a truly impressive plurality of theologies with a large variety of names, sometimes quite picturesque.

This new multiplicity of theological developments is essentially different from what we find in the history of Christian theology (both East and West) or in the various schools of Catholic theology. Many scholars are careful to emphasize this diversity. It should be emphasized here too because it serves to clarify my discussion of Franciscan theology.

Bernard Lonergan makes this perceptive observation: "For centuries, theologians have been divided into various schools. These schools differed among themselves on most questions in systematic theology. But since they all had a common origin in medieval scholasticism, they were able to understand each other and to attempt to dialogue, at least for the sake of comparing each other's doctrines. With the end of scholasticism, the bond of this common origin was weakened. Today Catholic theologians hold doctrines that differ greatly from one another. Everyone abounds in his own wisdom, while at the same time feeling bewildered because of the existence of systems different from his own."³⁸

In the past, then, there was a broad common field, in which the narrower fields found their place and justification as expressions of different views, approaches and sensibilities. These in turn gave rise to the different schools. In the past few years the winds of crisis have swept over this plurality of schools. With the general return of theology to Scripture as the basis for its reflection, greater attention has been paid to the historical-cultural settings in which its salvific content is worked out. It no longer makes sense to waste time on positions linked to a cultural past now recognized as long gone. This has been the reaction to the existence of theological schools, including the Franciscan school.

Today any reference to a common field through the plurality of schools is almost completely bypassed. It has been followed by a theological pluralism that is *qualitatively different*. This pluralism is based on and justified by appeal to culturally diverse systems of thought and perspectives, often closed, and in extreme cases, even opposed to each other. The aim is to express the unique-

³⁸"Unity and Plurality: The Coherence of Christian Truth" *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

ness of the faith pluralistically and in an acculturated form.³⁹ It is not difficult to realize the many theoretical and practical problems this involves. We must beware of making pluralism such an absolute that it becomes practically impossible to acknowledge the unity of faith and to live in communion with each other.⁴⁰

This is not the place to discuss the various positions in the field of theology.⁴¹ However, it is appropriate at the end of these remarks to recall briefly the theological and anthropological grounds of pluralism in theology. This will help us to better determine the fundamental reasons for the existence, meaning and need for a dynamic Franciscan theology, one that is equal to the different moments in history and various cultural circumstances.

There is a plurality of experiences of the Word of God and the faith, and therefore also a plurality of theological reflections on them. Why is this so?

1. The divine mystery, which is the object of the experience/reflection of faith, is inexhaustible in its content and always beyond all formulations and theological statements. These, although true, are always inadequate. St. Ephrem has expressed this in an extraordinary way: "Your Word presents many different aspects, as numerous as are the perspectives of those who study it. The Lord has colored his Word with varied beauties, so that those who search it may contemplate that which they prefer. In his Word he has hidden every treasure, so that each of us might discover a richness in what he contemplates"⁴² We should also recall the classic text of St. Thomas: "The act of faith does not terminate in a proposition but in a thing"⁴³ This "thing" or reality is the mystery of divine salvation and the God who is at work in this mystery as the divine reality which transcends every human statement about it.

2. The experience/reflection of faith always takes place in a given socio-cultural historical context. Other socio-cultural contexts can and do exist alongside this context (synchronically) and subsequent to it (diachronically). These form the setting for other experiences/reflections of faith.

³⁹K. Rahner insists on this qualitative diversity, "Pluralism in Theology and the Oneness of the Church's Procession of Faith," *Concilium* 46 (1969) 103-123; See also Bernard Lonergan, "Unity and Plurality: The Coherence of Christian Truth," *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

⁴⁰This was emphasized especially by J. Ratzinger in the article mentioned above.

⁴¹On this whole subject, see C. Geffré "Plurità della teologie e unità della fede," *Iniziazione alla Pratica della Teologia I* (Brescia: 1986) 121-146.

⁴²St. Ephrem, *Commenti sul Diatessaron*, 1, 18-19; SC 121, 52-53.

⁴³*Summa Theologica* II-II, qu. 1, a. 2, ad 2: "Actus fidei non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem."

3. The experience/reflection of faith in history is always fragmentary and partial compared to the fullness of the eschatological vision. This diversity is a source of development and plurality, at least in a diachronic sense.

4. Even within the same socio-cultural situation a variety of experiences/reflections of faith can and do exist. There may be a different gift of the Spirit (diversity of charisms), or different individual and social presuppositions may come into play in our concrete experience of the content of the faith and reflection on it.⁴⁴ St. Ephrem showed a good understanding of this in the passage cited above: "Your word presents many different aspects (under the action of the Spirit), as numerous as are the perspectives of those who study it."⁴⁵

Expressions such as "different aspects" and "numerous perspectives" have occurred frequently in this presentation. I would like to take a moment to explain their meaning, which is critical for a discussion of Franciscan theology.

These terms point to the "perspective" nature of the perception of faith and hence of theological reflection. This fact is rooted in the richness of the Word/Spirit and in the diversity of "positions" in which believers live and move as they actively assimilate the faith and reflect on it.

When I speak of perspectivism I do not mean relativism or mere subjectivism.⁴⁶ I mean a *true* approach to *true reality*, but from the point of view of the spiritual, experiential, and cultural world of the subject, both personal and collective, who experiences it. As the subject approaches reality, experiences it and reflects on it, he causes its *truth* to emerge as a truth *according to him and for him*.⁴⁷ The approach to the truth is an approach to this true reality, but always from a particular perspective.⁴⁸

⁴⁴Cf. Geffrè, "Pluralità della teologie e unità della fede," *Iniziazione alla Pratica della Teologia I* (Brescia: 1986) 127.

⁴⁵St. Ephrem, *Commenti sul Diatessaron*, 1, 18-19; SC 121, 52-53.

⁴⁶Cf. G. De Sotillo, "El perspectivismo, es relativismo?" *Naturaleza y Gracia* 5-6 (1958-59) 45-91.

⁴⁷In this matter we must never isolate the subject from the context of the group of which it has been part and/or in which it has entered. It is good to keep in mind what J. F. Malherbe writes, in *Iniziazione alla pratica della teologia I*, p. 90: everyone has and is his own world, there are as many perspectives in theology as there are human existences (that is, centers of perspective). However, since human beings are in solidarity with each other, their worlds are grouped together in common areas. So we have the Greek world, the Hebrew world, (and, we might add, the Franciscan world).

⁴⁸On this, cf. G. Colombo, *Perché la teologia*, Brescia 1980, 43-44; 75-76. S. Nicolosi writes, in *Medioevo francescano*, (Rome 1981) 151: "A Gospel *sine glossa* is the illusion of all glossers of the Gospel. There is no master of spirituality who does not present himself as a reader of the gospel 'without gloss' who is not actually a new glosser crowding their already crowded ranks. Every proposal of a spirituality is already a gloss."

In light of these initial considerations on pluralism in theology, we can understand on what basis and in what sense we can and should say that plurality of theological directions is possible, and indeed essential. Among these possibilities is a theology that is Franciscan in nature. The only reason for its actual existence is Francis of Assisi, founder of the Order of Friars Minor, and his real experience of the mystery of God, Christ and humanity. Added to this is the experience of the Franciscan Order with its own distinctive and vital form of life, rooted in the above-mentioned perspective of the mystery of God in Christ. The Order also has its own active and fruitful cultural-theological elaboration, which serves as the companion, memory, and prophecy of its own presence and witness in the church and society.

With these conclusions in mind, we must say that as a cultural activity of the Franciscan family, Franciscan theology is more than a mere possibility. The Order has both a right and a duty to join the polyphonic choir made up of the voices of the various theologies in the church. It is only a question of whether the Order has a voice and is capable of making it heard, so that the choir will be more varied, richer in sound and more powerful. The problem then, is not of a theological nature; it is a question of the vitality of the Order.

I have indicated the presuppositions required for an active and dynamic Franciscan theology. Such an Franciscan theology will be a cultural-theological expression of the life of the Order at the historical moment and in the socio-cultural context in which its mission is present and fulfilled. Now we must recall its structural elements, and indicate their essential and proper connection.

I will give special attention to this question, because it is not merely a theoretical one, but one with important practical consequences. In particular, this includes the approach to take in drawing up a plan of studies for academic institutes and the seminaries of the Order, where we mean to and must cultivate a real, dynamic, and living Franciscan theology.

3. *Structural elements of Franciscan theology and their connection*

I have dealt systematically with this aspect of the problem of Franciscan theology in the above-mentioned article in *Miscellanea Francescana*⁴⁹ In his 1985 article, De Villalmonste did not deviate much from the direction I had taken. I believe that his views and mine are still substantially valid. Here I will begin with them and arrange them so as to reflect my main concern here: the

⁴⁹Cf. G. Iammarrone, "Possibilità, senso e compiti di una 'teologia francescana' in se e per il momento attuale," *Miscellanea Francescana* 78 (1978) 339-356.

reason for and the meaning of a Franciscan theology, with a view to setting goals and establishing structures for research and theological studies in the Order, which is called to produce a theological reflection from a specifically Franciscan perspective.

Here is the definition I gave in that article: "Franciscan theology is an interpretation of and confrontation with the socio-economic, spiritual, and religious problems of a given cultural context (or contexts); it takes place within the Christian experience of faith as lived by those who consider and proclaim themselves followers of Francis of Assisi; in other words, by those who live their Christian experience in harmony with the spiritual intuition, form of life and the Christian witness that became history in Francis of Assisi; these have been continued and mediated by the Franciscan Order, using various forms of expression, depending on the needs and the socio-cultural problems of the historical moment, from the times of St. Francis up to our own day"⁵⁰

A Franciscan theology has three structural elements:

1. The Christian gospel experience, lived and witnessed by St. Francis of Assisi and his companions as their "moment of origins." It is the essential charism, the spirit of the founder. It is the founding event and permanent controlling element in subsequent Franciscan experience and witness, along with the theological reflection that has flowed from it or should flow from it.

2. The Order of Friars Minor in its life, presence and activity in the ecclesial and cultural context of the present moment.

3. The history, great and small, material and spiritual, of the Franciscan Order (the Conventuals, but indirectly and sometimes by way of contrast, of the various Franciscan reforms, with their proposals and their results). This history serves as a vehicle for what is Franciscan down through the centuries and as its sphere of operation in a variety of historical and cultural contexts.

Here on some reflections on these three elements, which I regard as useful, if not essential.

- a. By acting on the basis of the *Christian gospel experience* of St. Francis, Franciscan theology—to use the beautiful and expressive image of G. Gutierrez—"drinks water from its own well."⁵¹ It draws from an experience of Christ, and, in and through him, of God and man. This experience is marked by Francis's unique perspective of faith, which he handed on to his family as a

⁵⁰Ibid, 344-45.

⁵¹G. Gutierrez, *Bere acqua al proprio pozzo*, Brescia, 1984.

meaningful way of living the Christian mystery. When it draws on this experience, Franciscan theology is following the mandate of Vatican II to return to the spirit of the founder (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* 2b), and his fundamental inspiration—in other words, to his “existential understanding of the mystery of Christ.”⁵² Thus Franciscan theology must draw on the theological intuition that animated and guided Francis’s concrete form of life⁵³ and ultimately produced the stamp he left on his institute,⁵⁴ and the specific language and culture it created within the church and society.

The last few decades have seen a remarkable flowering of historical, sociological, cultural and theological studies on Francis’s times, his socio-historical and cultural environment, his personality, experience and religious intentions. All of this gives Franciscan theology a chance to assimilate, more confidently than in the past, the content and the outlines of Francis’s faith perspective. Thus Franciscan theology can easily draw fresh and crystal-clear water from its own well.⁵⁵

⁵²Cf. F. Ciardi, *I Fondatori uomini dello Spirito*, (Rome, 1952) 308; see also A. Romano, *I fondatori avanguardie storiche dello Spirito*, Rome, 1986. The personalities of the founders, their function and their presence in their religious families have been studied attentively during the last few years. The two books cited are among the best tools for comparison in this regard.

⁵³See Alexander Gerken, “The Theological Intuition of St. Francis of Assisi,” *Greyfriars Review* 7:1 (1993) 71-94.

⁵⁴Cf. Ciardi, *I Fondatori uomini dello Spirito*, (Rome, 1952) 308.

⁵⁵This epistemological and methodological study is not the place to dwell too long on what we might call the components or fundamental lines of the Christian experience (charism) of St. Francis. Those who have studied the witness of St. Francis have taken care to indicate them. Let us briefly recall the results of their studies, so that we may keep in mind the substance of the Christian experience of the founder of the Franciscan Order and of the commitment to Christian witness that his sons have undertaken after him.

Kajetan Esser sees the Franciscan archetype in the following elements: doing penance, living according to the Holy Gospel, apostolic preaching, life in highest poverty; life in Christian fraternity. Cf. Translation *Origins of the Franciscan Order*, trans. A. Daly and I. Lynch (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970) 195-255.

L. Iriarte, in his book *Vocazione francescana*, Turin, 1987, pp. 15ff, lists the following components: following the teaching and footsteps of Jesus Christ; the love which is God, loving God with a clean heart and pure mind; the poverty and humility of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the life of simplicity; fraternity; loving obedience; an apostolate marked by penance, by example, with the style of a minstrel and a missionary spirit.

O. Schmucki in his essay: “Linee fondamentali della ‘forma vitae’ nell’esperienza di San Francesco,” in Various authors, *Lettura biblico teologica delle Fonti Francescane*, Rome, 1979, pp. 183-231, lists a series of components that substantially agree with those of Iriarte.

See also S. Lopez, “El carisma franciscano,” *Verdad y Vida* 30 (1972) 323-360.

I believe that such an enumeration actually gives the constitutive elements of the Christian experience of St. Francis. I think, however, that in order for them to be understood in their deepest significance, they must not be merely listed, or juxtaposed, but we must make the spiritual-theological attempt to grasp their inner relationship on the basis of an lived intuition which

In this fresh and crystal-clear water Franciscan theology discovers not only Francis's perspective, but also the *biblical and traditional Christian data*, although in the way and in the form in which he assimilated, relived and proposed them.⁵⁶ It is precisely by directing attention to the water from its own well and drawing from it to drink that Franciscan theology is led to broaden its outlook and interests. By examining the Scriptures and the Christian tradition of faith and theology, it is able to grasp precisely how and to what extent Francis's gospel and Christian experience is rooted in the biblical and traditional data of faith, and how Franciscan theology might be a *renewal* of it in an *original, charismatic and creative* form.

Thus Franciscan theology takes us beyond its point of departure (the founding moment, the Christian experience of Francis as founder, and the experience of the origins), to the biblical and traditional Christian data *within its own movement*. But it does not examine these for the sake of harmonizing them, or for ideological purposes. Using today's instruments and improved scientific methods, it studies these data for what they are and what they say. Its goal is to lead us to a greater awareness of the authentic nature of Francis's spiritual experience as founder of the Order and of his specifically Christian, gospel perspective. In other words, Franciscan theology strives to understand his devotion to Scripture and to the doctrinal and spiritual preaching of the earlier and contemporary Church, and the novelty and distinctiveness of perspective contained in his intention of "living according to the Holy Gospel."⁵⁷

structures them, unifies them, and gives them that *specific tonality* which we are accustomed to call "Franciscan." In another article I tried to single out *this intuition* (the following of the poor and humble Jesus typical of St. Francis) and to show how it constitutes the *point of view* from which the Saint of Assisi lived in an *original way* the above-mentioned components. See "Rinnovamento della vita religiosa e francescana dopo il Concilio Vaticano II," *Miscellanea Francescana* 87 (1987) 67-95, especially 84-95.

⁵⁶ Ciardi rightly says: "The founder was guided, in obedience to the Spirit, to an existential understanding of the mystery of Christ and was able to see with new eyes the reality which surrounded him." *I Fondatori uomini dello Spirito* (Rome, 1952) 308.

⁵⁷ It is important to keep in mind what "the Holy Gospel" means for St. Francis. Scholars are not in agreement on this point. Certainly, for the Saint "the gospel" is Jesus Christ as a living reality who still summons his follower by his Word. However, for Francis the expression has a broader meaning; it means, as I wrote in another article: "the Holy Scripture, in its entirety, therefore the Old and New Testaments, even if the primacy is obviously reserved for the Gospel and the New Testament generally: this explains the use that Francis makes, especially in the Rules, of Old Testament sources." "La 'sequela di Cristo,' nelle *Fonti Francescane*," *Miscellanea Francescana* 82 (1982) 424-25.

On this basis we must say that biblical, patristic and medieval studies are essential to the development of an authentic Franciscan theology. Their contribution is not extrinsic, like a mere framework. They are the tools Franciscan theology uses to lay its biblical foundation and test its conformity to the Christian tradition. At the same time, they enable Franciscan theology to grasp its own originality—or rather the originality of Francis's Christian experience. This originality is the element that underlies the reasoning of Franciscan theology, to the extent that it is specifically theological.

A Franciscan theology that does not come to grips with biblical, patristic and medieval thought would be shutting itself up in an ivory tower and spinning its wheels. In the institutes of study where Franciscan theology is and must be developed, in addition to courses on Francis's Christian experience, his charism, and his theological intention, there must also be biblical, patristic and medieval courses. One result of such courses will be biblical and traditional Christian authenticity. They will also provide the perspective of the experience of faith and reflection on it proper to the Franciscan charism.

b. The structural element mentioned above in number 2 refers to *the Franciscan Order in its present historical situation*. The Order is a vital organism, a part of the church and society. It journeys with them, following after Francis of Assisi with his charism as founder, contributing its values, its witness to God, Christ and humanity. If the Order is to carry out its function more effectively and make its presence and action more incisive, it must make a cultural-theological contribution. This element gives Franciscan theology dynamism and makes it something to be done rather than an accomplished fact. This element tears Franciscan theology away from nostalgia, which is like an unproductive memory. This element sensitizes Franciscan theology to prophecy and to the insertion of Francis's Christian gospel perspective into historical situations where it lives and is called to bear witness.

For Franciscan theology to be dynamic and concrete the life of the church and the problems of the modern world in which it functions as part of the life of the Order must enter into its development. These problems include ecclesiology, Christology, Mariology, ecumenism, spirituality, the relationship of Christianity to other religions, the liberation and emancipation of humanity, peace, ecology, etc. By being open to these areas, Franciscan theology (that which is being developed and that which remains to be developed today) can show how values that derive from the gospel message as relived by Francis from his perspective, and through him by his Order, can make a powerful contribution to the development of a Christian theology in the context of contemporary culture.

Since the cultural "today" is a legitimate and predominant element in creating and developing a Franciscan theology from a dynamic perspective, it must also be an element in creating a program of studies for the institutes and seminaries of the Franciscan Order.

c. The structural element mentioned above in number 3 also deserves thorough and careful study. This is the *long material and spiritual history of the Order*, which acts as a bridge between the Franciscan experience of the beginnings and the historical-cultural Franciscan present. This history consists essentially of the Franciscan tradition, with all its divisions and diversity—the Franciscan tradition in the form of the Order's material and spiritual life over the course of more than seven centuries.

De Villalmonste noted that this tradition, however glorious, is felt by many Franciscans to be quite far removed from the life of the Order today and largely irrelevant, permeated as it is by medieval scholasticism. Aside from the fact that even its language is becoming increasingly unfamiliar, it cannot be denied that the form of mind in which the medieval scholastic tradition was conceived and the forms of expression in which it took flesh are different from our own. But does this mean that we must bypass seven centuries of life, history, culture and theology in order to express and establish a direct and immediate correlation between the Franciscan beginnings and the present?

We could not make such a near-fatal leap even if we wanted to. Nor should we, for it would mean losing a treasure house of values, experience and wisdom, mixed, of course, with human misfortunes and weakness. We must shy away from a romantic mentality that would see every period following that of the origins as a time of complete decay, not to mention deviation and betrayal.⁵⁸ True, the origins still have a unique importance as the time of foundation. But they never come to us in a pure state; it is always by way of mediation and interpretation. While these interpretations undoubtedly bear the imprints and dust of time, they are also the channels through which the

⁵⁸This tendency or temptation has crept in among Franciscans in the past and continues to do so today, fascinated as they are by the glory and spiritual radiance of the origins. But this is actually an illusion and a kind of betrayal of a history rich in content and experiences, even if it is not always an uplifting one. Cardinal F. Ehrle wrote, referring precisely to the evolution of Franciscanism after the death of the founder: "It is ... totally wrong to consider the first moment of the realization as the most genuine expression and culmination of the complete ideal, and then to consider every consecutive stage of development as a partial degeneration and decadence, regarding as destructive those forces that lead to such a movement." *Archiv für Literatur und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters* III, (Berlin, 1887) 559.

distinctive and essential perspective of the origins has found expression, shown vitality and strength, been productive and come down to us.

A correct evaluation of the material and spiritual history of the Franciscan Order with a view to developing a dynamic Franciscan theology requires application of the same canons of hermeneutics used today for the correct evaluation of the tradition of a social group. In theology this means the tradition of the church as a community of believers who have lived and still live in history.

In its material existence as well as its theology, the Order has been the hermeneutic subject of the *perspective* in which St. Francis and his first companions lived the mystery of Christ, the Christian mystery of God and humanity.⁵⁹ Of course, in its interpretations and concrete expression the Order has not always fulfilled its lofty aim. It has known decadence in its forms of presence and thought. But through its great lights (Bonaventure, Scotus, Bernardine of Siena, Maximilian Kolbe, etc.), it has *creatively relived* that perspective. It has elucidated and developed its potential and has inculturated it in new situations, even though it has done so with limitations, inadequacies, partial omissions and moments of darkness.

This entire work of concrete expression is "Franciscan tradition," the tradition of the Franciscan Order. More accurately, it is the tradition of Franciscans insofar as it concerns the ecclesiastical disciplines such as theology, philosophy and spirituality created by Franciscans.

An *uncritical* approach to historical evidence will make it seem distant, as if from another time. It will no longer seem to have any function in the life and thought of the Order at this moment in history. It will appear to be permeated by a different sensibility and working with different cultural tools.

On the other hand, a correct *critical approach* to this historical evidence will help us appreciate its true abiding value. In all authentic forms of life and thought of historical Franciscanism we find the "spirit," the specific perspective of Francis as he lived the gospel and the Christian mystery. In these forms, so to speak, this perspective has revealed some of its latent potential.⁶⁰ It has shown itself capable of creating new realities, largely unwritten by comparison with those of the beginnings.

⁵⁹For an instructive parallel see C. Molari, "The Hermeneutical Role of the Church Community on the Basis of Judeo-Christian Experience," *Concilium* 113. Revelation and Experience, ed. E. Schille, Beerlx and B. Van Iersel (New York: Crossroad, 1979) 93-105.

⁶⁰On this see H. Marrou, *La conoscenza storica* Bologna, 1975.

Here it would be appropriate to pause and list these unwritten achievements and accomplishments, but that is impossible. However I would like to mention the profound theology of the cross as developed by St. Bonaventure and the doctrine of the primacy of Christ as affirmed and justified by Duns Scotus and his school. In addition there are the Franciscan theological-philosophical theses that portray God as overflowing love and freedom. There is also the tradition of meditation on the mysteries of the life of Christ through such devotions as the Way of the Cross and the *cordia pia*. Finally there is devotion to the Immaculate Conception, including the Marian thought of St. Maximilian Kolbe. All of these elements are positive and highly theological. They are not, however, explicitly contained in the Franciscan experience at its origins. They are its creative achievements, containing in large part new elements not found in the origins.

These remarks on such an important and difficult subject have been at best fragmentary. But we must conclude that in the course of time a Franciscan theology has been constructed. We continue this work today, along with the Order of which Franciscan theology is an intellectual, cultural and spiritual offshoot. For such a Franciscan theology to be dynamic it must make use of the rich historical and theological heritage of the authentic Franciscan tradition in its highest and most pure form. Franciscan theology must compare itself with this tradition in order to draw from it the values of the original Franciscan perspective that it is expressing, even though in historically conditioned forms. Franciscan theology must also become involved in the sensibility and, to some extent, in the methods of this tradition in order to keep them alive and explain them in new cultural situations.⁶¹

All this demands and justifies the interest of Franciscan theology in the history of the Franciscan Order, especially its thought, tradition and school or theological orientation. It is not a question of archaeology or a desire to blow our own horn. This interest is vital because without it the development of Franciscan theology would be deprived of elements and data that can make it more complete, more itself, and more *Franciscan*.

Obviously this vital interest in the cultural and theological tradition of the Order is principally a search for the typically Franciscan spirit, profound values, intuitions and perspectives. These, however, are clothed in the thought forms, mental categories and language of past centuries, such as scholasticism

⁶¹These dimensions of tradition should be kept in mind: it not only mediates the old in new forms, but also suggests precious directives on how to turn it to account in order to draw the new from it: cf. Malherbe, *Iniziazione alla Pratica della Teologia*, vol. I, (Brescia: 1986) 95.

and humanism. For this reason Franciscan theology must study Franciscans and non-Franciscans (the latter can help us understand the former) whose theological works and cultural productions are structurally remote from the modern way of thinking, writing and communicating. There are enormous obstacles to this work of study and decodification. But Franciscan theology must begin to work with these documents, these witnesses to the spiritual vitality of the Franciscan Christian perspective through the centuries, if it does not wish to deprive itself of such a rich and fruitful spiritual diet.

Obviously such an approach attributes to theology by Franciscans of the past a directive rather than a normative value. Theology by Franciscans has not created some eternal normative substance for Franciscan theology to study and imitate today, but a direction for its method and a source of profound values.⁶²

Franciscan institutes need to have courses in theology, philosophy, spirituality, etc., which will serve as an introduction to the thought of the great Franciscan masters and saints, and to the significant facts in the Order's historical-cultural life. All these things can make the Order itself more competent to face, on the level of life and culture, the historical moment in which it is working. Study of the life, tradition and thought of the Order is not archaeology or an interest in buried fossils. It is a productive excavation, a school of thought, a learning of methods. It is a stimulus to imitate and continue the explanation and concrete expression of the spiritual and theological potential contained in *St. Francis's perspective* on the Christian mystery. This is the observation point where the Order must stand if it wishes to live its present.

I conclude these reflections with the hope that they will help Franciscans understand better the importance of theological reflection for their own form of ecclesial and social witness. I hope they will help them develop a more lively awareness of the need to continue creatively the great theological tradition of their forebears. Finally, I hope these reflections will help them focus their attention, more consciously and clearly, on their cultural and spiritual commitment to the founding experience of the mystery lived and witnessed by Francis of Assisi, which they must radiate in a special way in the church and in the world.

⁶²Cf. J. Lang, "Gibt es heute eine franziskanische Theologie?" *Franziskanische Studien* 57 (1975) 40.