

The Spirituality St. Francis: Francis's Image of God

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Francis was no theologian. So, if we had asked him what God was, we could not have hoped to get a learned answer to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. Francis was a witness to the living God, and all we can require of such a witness is that he should describe what he saw, heard and felt and assure us that his experience was not mere fantasy but a reality that had turned his life around.

Therefore, Francis is acting as a witness when he stands before us as an example of what God can do in us. At the same time, he is an acute reminder to us of God's profundity, for which we hunger and to which we have made up our minds not to respond seriously because we suspect that if we did, then our lives, too, would be turned around.

In this way, Francis shows us clearly that God is present among us and that we must welcome Him with open arms if we are to recover the joy of feeling that we are loved with an infinite love. Francis's testimony to his faith is credible because he was a living proof that true humanity flourishes when we dare to allow the living God to be present in our lives.

Part I God and Francis

When we try to approach the God whom Francis knew, we are touching upon what is fundamental in every committed, responsible Christian. Such a person's journey through life is dominated by the presence of God. It is this which defines and authenticates one's quality as a Christian and which, therefore, cannot be ignored when describing the soul's spiritual journey.

1. God in Franciscan Spirituality

With some rare exceptions, Franciscan spirituality has been traditionally built on concrete values which, while they are basic, do not reveal their source or the precise part they play in the whole scheme of salvation.

In the origin and course of Francis's spiritual life, as in all Christian spirituality, we can see the action of the Spirit of the Lord which opens the soul to His grace and to living one's life according to the image of God made present thereby (Test 1). Francis succeeded in shaping an original mode of Christian life within the Church because he had experienced God in an original way. By beginning his new way of life, he taught a series of attitudes and ways of living the Gospel that served to inspire many believers who were seeking to live their faith more fully.

Still, it is not enough simply to acknowledge how important God was in Francis's spirituality. Even while we accept that His role was supreme, we must not approach it in any mechanistic way or neglect to relate it to the context of Francis's life, which gives it meaning and which proves its effectiveness. That is, a simple description of concepts taken from Francis's writings is not enough to show the importance which God had in his life. Instead, we need to read his words again in order to rediscover things that were clear to him but which have lost their significance for us because of the changes in society.

This will not be an easy task, given our incapacity and the lack of adequate means, but we must try to do it at all costs since otherwise we are liable to form an image of God which does not correspond with the living God who transformed Francis and accompanied him during his life.

2. *Difficulties in Knowing the God of Francis*

Reconstructing Francis's image of God from his life and writings is a complicated task which is made even more difficult by his natural reluctance to reveal his most intimate religious experiences. He distrusted any brother who was unable to keep to himself the favors the Lord had granted him, but who, instead of acting on these favors, preferred merely to talk about them. To Francis's way of thinking, such a course of action would be futile because it would benefit neither the friar himself nor his audience (Adm 21), since it belongs to the Most High alone to reveal "the good things" He bestows on us (Adm 28).

On the other hand, as we have said, Francis was not a theologian but a mystic who lacked the technical language needed to describe his experiences. So he had to have recourse to the language of the liturgy to describe the resonance which God's overwhelming presence set up in within him. He almost always expressed himself in the form of praise for God and used terminology which was impersonal and in common use, so that it concealed rather than revealed his inmost feelings.

Francis's writings are the only direct expression of his experiences that we have, and even they were dictated to secretaries. So we must examine these

writings closely and try to determine the exact nature of those attributes of God which appear there. And to do this, we must reconstruct the social, cultural and religious atmosphere in which Francis formed his own individual image of God. This is so because every mystical experience, at least among Western peoples, is conditioned by the image the mystic has formed of the God to whom he or she gives his or her heart.

3. Francis's Image of God

When we speak of Francis's image of God, we are not referring to a Being of fancy, a product of the imagination, totally unconnected with reality. What we want to know is: what image of God attracted and inspired Francis? What did God mean for him? How did he picture or represent God to himself?

Even after Francis had become a "churchman," he received no formal theological training of any kind. Accordingly, we can disregard the influence — at least the direct influence — of the contemporary currents of theological thought on his building up of his own image of God. The spiritual formation he received was that of the normal lay person of his day, and even this he breathed in and absorbed almost unconsciously, just like the other laypeople of his own place and time. If we want to find out precisely the elements which contributed directly to Francis's ability to condense his experience and image of God into a popular spirituality, we must examine his immediate background, that is, his family, his schooling, and the liturgy and art of his time.

We have no factual record of Francis's religious formation as a child. The descriptions which Celano gives are pure literary artifice. In his First Life, Celano paints a dismal picture of Francis's family background and upbringing, while in his Second Life, he depicts Francis's mother as a model of virtue, comparable to Our Lady's cousin Elizabeth (1Cel 1; 2Cel 3). Faced as we are with this contradiction, the best we can do is presume that Francis was taught the ordinary religious values as part of his cultural inheritance.

The parish school of St. George, which Francis attended (LM 15:5), was presided over by a cleric who used the psalter as a basic textbook to teach him to read and write Latin, and most likely, the fundamentals of the Faith and the Christian life. Learning the psalms by heart was basic in forming the image of God in the heart and mind of the child Francis and the Office of the Passion is proof of the deep impression left by his memorizing of the psalms.

In addition, the liturgy in Assisi introduced Francis to the mysterious inner world of religion, a world in which his image of God must have become sharper and more detailed as he came to understand more clearly the symbolism of the words and actions of the priests. And the sermons he heard must have helped, too, because they would presumably have been acceptably in-

structive, since Bishop Rufino, Guido's predecessor as Bishop of Assisi, was one of the first commentators on, and teachers of, the Decree of Gratian.

As well as being instructed by the liturgy, Francis was also taught by religious pictures and sculpture. As Emile Mâle tells us, in the Middle Ages art was regarded and used as a teaching tool. All the knowledge that would be useful in a person's life — the religious history of the world from the Creation onwards, the dogmas of religion, the examples of the saints, the hierarchy of the virtues — all this was depicted in the stained-glass windows and in the statues on the facades of the churches. Each cathedral was a somewhat of a "Bible for the poor." "The holy people of God," including the illiterate and the slow-witted, could see pictured before their eyes almost everything they already knew by faith. The great figures shown in stained glass and stone bore witness to what the Church was teaching. The countless statues, arranged according to a plan, were symbolic of the order in which the theologians had marshaled the world of ideas. In this way, through the medium of art, the most important concepts of theology were conveyed, if only confusedly, to the humblest of intellects.

Nor must we forget that medieval popular devotion was nourished by pious stories and legends as well as by pure, abstract dogma, stories which had emerged from a background of several cultural and religious strata. Medieval piety was the result of four layers or strata of tradition: native or "primitive;" Roman; Judaeo-Christian; and German-Celtic.

We can see this in the literature and architectural monuments of Assisi. The temple of Minerva and the Roman museum remind us of the Roman epoch, with which are connected "The Legends of the Martyrs," written in the eleventh century, which relate how Christianity was preached in pagan Assisi by the first bishops, Rufino, Victorino and Savino. In the archives of the cathedral there exists copious documentation from the year 963, describing the customs and usages of the Lombards, who lived in the town. No doubt after his conversion, Francis came into contact with other, more sophisticated ways of depicting God. Speaking with theologians within and from outside his Fraternity, as well as the material he possibly read or heard read, must have influenced his spiritual growth. But when we analyze his later writings about God, we still see there the popular image of God derived from liturgy and tradition, although experienced more intensely. He also built up his vision of God from his knowledge of Scripture, which he acquired by striving to live it to the fullest and not by any set program of study (2Cel 102-105).

At any rate, the image of God which Francis formed for himself interests us, not so much because it was original but because it led him to plan a new form of life which would make clear what God is and means for the fervent

believer. Therefore, we are more interested in the attitudes which Francis's thought was capable of forming than with the ideas which it might provide. This is so because Francis's image of God was that of One who motivates and urges us, with His help, to put into practice in our own lives what we discover when we meet Him for ourselves.

4. A God who Converts

Behind the traditional image of God which Francis had formed was hidden the living God who utterly changed and broadened his spiritual horizons. Thomas of Celano (1Cel 5) describes this disconcerting experience in the well-known dream at Spoleto. In a typically feudal setting, it shows us the change in values which God wrought in Francis. Up to this point his one aim in life had been to win knighthood on the field of honour. But now all his thoughts were turned towards his Lord, who had given him life and for whom he would henceforth live.

The God of Francis's conventional background, who had remained unchanged and perfectly compatible with his other values, now gave place to the living and life-giving God who conquers and takes over, who broadens and even tears apart the accustomed horizons of one's life. Francis's consent to the evidence of God's lordship would mean that from then on he would live in a kind of continual ecstasy, a permanent leaving of self behind to go out to the God of fulfillment. After this experience, he would no longer be able to go on cultivating his own personality but would set forth along new roads as a pilgrim of the Absolute, searching for the wellspring at which he could quench his thirst for God.

Because Francis was a man of the Middle Ages, accustomed to seeing God in the socio-religious context of his times, the sudden Divine invasion of his life must have been devastating for him. In his Testament (1-3), as he looks back over his life, he tells us that the forceful presence of the Lord completely changed his outlook and approach to everything. Where he had formerly felt only utter revulsion — for example, at the very sight of a leper — he now found joy because he could at last see the world from God's perspective.

5. Speaking about God

When we are speaking about God, we always do so in symbols and approximations even though these linguistic devices are insufficient and inappropriate. Hence, we can never speak of Him in a fitting way (CantSol 2). In reality, we are tackling an almost hopeless task because we are trying to describe Absolute Transcendence, Ineffable Mystery, the One who is absolutely other and different from ourselves. But as believers, we need to speak about God because, if we do not express our faith in words, it will dry up and die. If we do

not try to describe God, His presence will fade from our minds and disappear completely. And so, we must take our courage in our hands and speak about Him even though we are well aware of the difficulties involved.

When a person who believes deeply in God wishes to speak about Him, he or she feels the tension of striving to do the impossible. This is what Francis felt all his life. Although he was sparing in words when he spoke about God, yet God was the only subject he did speak about. The ardor of God's presence urged him to tell of His greatness, but when he came to put his thoughts into words, he succeeded only in stammering inadequately. The great apophatic or "negating" tradition of the East and West describes God by saying what He is *not*, and Francis is in this tradition when he speaks about those attributes of God which begin with a negative and which reflect the teaching of the Fourth Lateran Council: "No similarity between the Creator and the creature can be noted without a greater dissimilarity being noted also" (Denzinger 806: 1215 AD).

Therefore, to say that God cannot err, that He is ineffable, incomprehensible, unknowable, immutable and invisible, is simply to acknowledge His mystery our incapability of translating our experience of Him into human concepts. Nevertheless, we must try to do so, and one of the less inadequate ways to accomplish this is to describe Him as transcendent.

Part II

God as Transcendent

When we are speaking about the God whom Francis knew, it is artificial to make a distinction between His transcendence and His immanence because Francis never used these terms and consequently must not have experienced God in that way. Certainly, God's inaccessibility was part of his experience: God is beyond the grasp of every human power because He dwells in a light that is inaccessible to our eyes (Adm 1:5) and His dwelling place is beyond our reach.

But God's transcendence does not mean that He is isolated, cut off from us. The God of Francis is a God who is heedful of us, solicitous about us. Although He is other than us, he still draws near to us, inviting us to break out of the circle of our egoism and free ourselves to go to Him. We could say then that the God of Francis is "bi-polar" because He is both the Most High and yet our Father, the Son and yet eternal. There is in Him no separation between these two dimensions, but since we lack the language to describe Him fully, we must have recourse to this description by individual attributes even though we are fully conscious of its artificiality.

1. *The Majesty of God*

The Romanesque world was dominated by the concept of majesty. The most familiar Divine figure then was that of the Almighty seated on His throne of judgment and surrounded by His vassals. These vassals, however, were not the Apostles but the ancient figures in the visions in the Apocalypse and the Archangels of the heavenly army. This ode of representation was extended to include Christ, who was also depicted as a judge in the statues and paintings above porticos, archways and main entrances.

Still, this representation of God in majesty did not last long. Little-by-little, the full realization dawned that this terrifying God, seated in the midst of an assembly of judges, a God who showed His anger by sending down famine, war or plague on humanity, had become man in Christ, and not just the Christ of the Apocalypse but the Christ of the Gospels and, more precisely, of the Synoptic Gospels. So when Gothic art and architecture began to emerge, they did not venerate a God who was distant and terrible but God, the Son of man, in whose features His humanity could be clearly seen.

In spite of this humanization of God showing Himself to us in Christ, Francis still retained the image of the majestic Lord, Judge of the living and the dead, who rewards and punishes according to one's deeds (RegNB 23:4; 1EpFid 2:22; 2EpFid 85; EpRect 25), and in whose presence only adoration in fear and reverence is appropriate (EpOrd 4). Actually this is the image of the Last Judgment which St. Matthew paints in his Gospel (Mt 25:31-46).

In Francis's writings, the word "majesty" does not appear, but he does speak of the Most High God, Supreme, Eternal, Almighty and Glorious, adjectives which describe the majestic transcendence which he saw in God. This transcendence was a divine dimension which showed that God does not exist in things or events and is not to be confused with them, but transcends them as their support and reason for being.

With the words "High" and "Most High," Francis expressed his experience of God, who is beyond all things. If he had studied the phenomenology of religion or the history of comparative religions, we could say that he used such words to describe the "numinous" quality of God and was referring to His divinity alone and to nothing else. In fact it was Francis's familiarity with the language of the liturgy, the Scriptures, especially the psalms, and the Fathers, that provided him with the vocabulary he used in speaking about the transcendence of God.

The Most High God is the *Rex tremendae majestatis*, the "king of fearful majesty," in whose presence we find ourselves overwhelmed and whom we, although unworthy, praise and bless (CantSol 1f.; RegNB 17:18). The Most High is He who is farthest beyond us yet who makes Himself present in our

everyday lives as our salvation. His "fearful majesty" does not prevent Him from being our most bountiful Father, our Brother as man, and in the Eucharist, one with us in our poverty (EpCler 3; Test 10; UltVol 1).

As well as being the Most High, God is also Supreme (RegNB 17:18; 23:1), another term beloved of Francis, to which he added the words "Highest" and "Sublime," to indicate the incomprehensible distance between us and the transcendent God. God is on the far horizon of transcendence, on the outer edge of the ultimate, where no one can challenge His absolute "otherness" from everything outside him.

The eternity we attribute to God is not a symbol of age nor does it refer exclusively to the past. To be eternal is to be contemporaneous with and present in all ages, to live in and be involved with every stage of history. God is eternal, not only because He has no beginning or end, but also because He lights the way for His creatures, goes with them on their journey and waits for them at the end (RegNB 23:3f). This limitless concern for us is possible because of His eternity and engages His omnipotence on our behalf.

God is omnipotent because he is the Creator, the author of miracles which show that He wishes to have us share in His own life. Creation, incarnation, redemption and raising us to the glory of heaven are all works which are beyond our possibilities and which can be attributed to the Almighty alone (RegNB 23:8). But these "wonders" take place in daily life; therefore, when Francis recognized them on his own spiritual journey, he could do nothing less than open his heart in praise, which is the only reasonable way to acknowledge God's omnipotence (RegNB 23:1-4; LaudDei 1).

The terms "King" and "Emperor" have the political-religious aura of justifying power, yet they retain the transcendent implications of the liturgical language from which they are derived, specifically from the psalms. God is King because He has reigned from eternity over heaven and earth (OffPass 7:3; 1:5), and the kingdom of God is present to the extent that we consent to and accept His will to save us by bringing us to the fullness of happiness in heaven (ExpPat 4). By opening up this path to glory, God is exercising His kingship, as we go on maturing until we are fit to receive the glory of our fulfilment in Him. Only then will God fully exercise His kingship because only then shall we have fully entered into His Kingdom.

Despite the regal implications of such terms, Francis's image of God's kingship was not one of power but of humiliation and suffering. The figure of Christ on the cross in San Damiano must have impressed deeply on him the image of a Lord who rules from the cross and not from a throne (OffPass 7:9), a vision that reflects St. John's theology, in which the suffering Servant is the Lord who reigns. Hence Francis's insistence in urging his brothers to follow

in poverty the King who rules from the cross and who will make us kings of the kingdom of heaven (RegB 6:4). This way of following in Christ's footsteps led him to tread the path of spiritual conversion meekly and perseveringly (ExpPat 5).

2. *The Holiness of God*

God's holiness is connected with His omnipotence (LaudDei 1). Once again, it was the liturgy that supplied Francis with the words to express God's sanctity, that majestic sanctity which the Church has imbibed from Scripture and proclaims in the form of praise in the Sanctus of the Mass. These, then, were the words Francis used to express his own awe at the holiness of God. God's presence, however, does not strike terror into those who approach Him, because Jesus has bridged the chasm between the sacred and the profane.

The holiness of God (ExhLd 16) has been made present to us in the Child who was born for us (OffPass 15:7) of the glorious, holy Virgin Mary (2EpFid 4). It is this same holiness that continues to sanctify us by means of the signs of bread, wine and the word (EpOrd 14, 34), which the priests should administer in a holy manner (EpOrd 22f.) within holy Church (EpOrd 30), so that we all may share in that holiness and be saved (2EpFid 34).

Accordingly, God's holiness was not a cause of terror for Francis, although it is for those who have not repented and must face the last judgment (2EpFid 82, 85). When Francis contemplated God's glory and majesty, he saw more clearly than ever that he was only a sinful man (RegNB 23:8). But this did not cause him to give up trying to close the great abyss that separated him from God, the Holy One. Instead, he implored the Son and the Spirit to help him in his sinful unworthiness to praise the Father as he deserves to be praised (RegNB 23:5), so that he might be able to glorify the holiness of God (2EpFid 4, 54, 62) along with the four living creatures who day and night sing without ceasing: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (LaudHor 1).

Although Francis felt that he was such a sinner in the presence of Him who alone is holy, he was able to endure God's gaze because he knew that God's holiness is not self-regarding and does not exclude others but is sanctifying and healing. He had experienced these effects in his own weak humanity when he felt God welcoming him and giving him new life.

God makes us holy by giving Himself to us, by being present in the midst of sinful humanity. Yet this does not diminish or impair His transcendence, because He alone takes the initiative. That is, God's holiness never becomes confused with human holiness. God is holy because he sanctifies, and man is holy because he is sanctified by God. Although Francis felt that he was not worthy even to mention God's name (CantSol 2), he wanted to sing unceas-

ingly to God, the Holy One, for having welcomed sinners into the warm circle of His own holiness (LaudHor 1).

3. *The Goodness of God*

Francis's faith in the basic goodness of all things was the result of his wish "to think with the Church." In his day, the Church was troubled by heresy, especially the heresy of the Cathari, who taught that the visible world was evil because it had not been created by the good God. That is why Francis insisted so strongly, not only that all things are good (CantSol), but that their source, the God who created them, is also good. Consequently, we should gratefully acknowledge that everything good belongs to God since all goodness comes from Him (RegNB 17:17f.).

God's goodness is another aspect of the majestic holiness of His transcendence. Above all else, God is good; even more, He alone is good, the only good (RegNB 23:2). Even from his necessarily limited perspective, Francis's sight of God's goodness overwhelmed him and showed him that he could never hope to plumb its depths.

Following the example of the Fathers, Francis used the same language to stammer about what he knew was the source from which all good flows (ExpPat 2). His contemplation of God's goodness provided him with countless new ways of appreciating more keenly all the good things He has given us. From God Himself to whatever good qualities we may possess, everything is good and is given to us out of His goodness (RegNB 17; 5f.; 23:1,8).

Still, the evil within us blinds us and prevents us from seeing and doing anything good (RegNB 22:6). Moreover, it claims for itself whatever good things we may do, denies their true origin and attributes them to itself alone (Adm 2:3). This "robbery" of God's goodness, when we make ourselves the source and the end of everything good, disrupts the harmony intended by God. We turn His gifts into weapons to use against other people when we appropriate those gifts for ourselves and prevent others from enjoying them (Adm 5:5-7). This sin of trying to make ourselves the object of every gift and refusing to refer God's gifts to their Lord and giver was seen by Francis as a blasphemy against the abounding goodness of God (Adm 8:3). The contemplation of God, good in Himself and in all His works, led Francis to praise Him for everything good that he saw, even though he was acutely conscious of his inability to do so properly (2EpFid 61f.).

Francis's vision of God as good moved him to do more than praise Him, although praise itself was important. His image of God also urged him to action because the most logical response to God's bounty is to imitate it to the limit of our abilities. Our experience of God's goodness should inspire us to do good also (RegNB 17:19), even though we may not be able to do so entirely

out of love (2EpFid 27). We shall succeed in understanding our essential poverty only if we realize that we must refer everything to God in praise and practice.

Part III **The Nearness of God**

When we speak about God as being transcendent, we allude to the artificiality of divorcing His transcendence from His immanence or nearness. Similarly, we may not truly describe God as being only inaccessible, nor may we say that He is anything other than close to us. Francis did not try to make such distinctions but saw and followed God in His total reality.

Francis's dream at Spoleto changed his image of God from the conventional God who scarcely mattered in life's options to the living and true God who had won his heart so completely that he could never again disregard Him. Captivated by his new vision of God, he felt drawn to plunge into the Divine immensity to experience the Source of life and to feel truly alive (1Cel 6; L3S 8). Hitherto, he had confused God with the idols which society held up before him, but now it was the one true God Himself who became the sole purpose and support of his life.

No doubt, the phrase "God, living and true" had an anti-Cathari meaning for Francis, but, besides being an affirmation of orthodoxy, it also expressed his perception of the living God who opens up the future for us. His meeting with the living God had made him see life no longer as being overshadowed by the prospect of bodily death but as being lived in the presence of Him who really lives and who therefore makes everything else live, too.

1. God is Love

To say that God is love is to say that God loves. Because of love, He came to us, creating us, sending His Son and redeeming us (RegNB 23:3), and this same Love accompanies us on our way towards Him (Test 1,4, 6,14). The fact that we owe our existence to love and that there is a God who loves us was the basis of Francis's whole spiritual life. So he urged his brothers not to shut themselves up in selfish isolation so that they might be received totally by Him who gave Himself up totally for us (EpOrd 29).

Francis's response to God's complete and disinterested love could only be to struggle tenaciously to rid himself of any obstacle that might hinder the growth of his own love for God (RegNB 22:26; 23:8), a love which he knew was limited and needed the help of the Son and the Holy Spirit to be an adequate response (RegNB 23:5).

Francis knew that God's love for him defined him as a person and that only by the power of that love could he reach his full growth. Hence he strove to advance in the one thing necessary—love for God and his fellow humans, whom God loves. But only God Himself could help him to respond properly to His love. Confronted with this necessity and, at the same time, with his own shortcomings, Francis implored the help of the Son and the Holy Spirit (RegNB 23:5) and gently invited all his brothers to love the Lord God with all their hearts, all their souls and all their minds, all their strength and powers, all their understanding, all their efforts, all their emotions, all their desires and wishes (RegNB 23:8), that is, with the whole of their being.

Love of God must not be an excuse for forgetting our brothers and sisters. When we love God, we begin to take part in the power of His love and that embraces everyone (2EpFid 18). Because God loves us all, we must love our neighbors as ourselves (2EpFid 27) even when they are our enemies (RegNB 22:1-4). This is so because, for us Christians, our loving others does not depend on their returning our love but on the certainty that God's love is transforming for them and for us. Therefore, our love must be put into practice effectively, since we know that love for our fellow humans, for our brothers and sisters, is the sign of our love of God (EpMin 9).

2. *God the Creator*

Creation was the first sign that God loves us, and it came about because God's love is not sterile but fruitful, a fruitfulness that is demonstrated by imparting His own life to creatures. Still more, He proved that He loves us by drawing so near to us that finally He became man among us, a marvel worked by both the Father and the Son as well as by the Holy Spirit.

The image of God the Creator was much loved in popular piety in the Middle Ages. The Church in its liturgy proclaimed its belief in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. The liturgy was echoed in the art forms in churches and cathedrals which served to feed the faith of the people. To counteract heresy, the Councils of the Church continually repeated their belief in God the Creator, and this became a familiar image of God.

Far from being a mere intellectual exercise, this expression of faith in the Creator was a serious statement that created things are good because He who created them and keeps them in being is also good. The need to explain the existence of evil had led some people to accept the existence of an evil Principle, which was one of the main tenets of the heresy of the Cathari. But most of the ordinary faithful went on believing spontaneously in the action of a good God as the creating Principle of everything in existence. Accordingly, they valued life and the good things of earth, in which they saw the marks of

the Goodness that created and sustained them. Francis shared in this popular vision of God as Creator. He wrote that all things, both spiritual and corporal, have come from His hands (CantSol), especially mankind, made in His image and likeness (RegNB 23:1). Creation, however, was not an isolated act, but was continued as God's providence (RegNB 23:8), giving new proofs of His creative love and His will to save mankind from its fatal egoism. God's will to continue creation led to the Redemption and will lead to our eternal happiness in heaven.

For Francis, all creatures were witnesses to the Source from which they had come. Beauty recalled to him the Divine Beauty, and goodness told him that his Creator was Goodness Itself (2Cel 165). Humanity, in the midst of creation, was the finest fruit of His creative activity. God made man in His own image and left him free to decide his own fate. Our history tells us how badly we have abused that freedom. Yet we do not become independent of God by turning our backs on him. Francis knew this and was aware that, as he had come from God's hands, so his destiny and that of all mankind was to remain in those hands, as in the hands of an elder brother.

The whole of creation is a sign and evidence of the love of God. By means of things and events, including the most insignificant (RegNB 10:3; EpMin 2), God continues to reveal to us His will to save us. Every event is a grace that we should accept and refer to God in praise as a sign of our gratitude. So Francis invited all creatures to join the chorus of humanity (CantSol) in gratefully referring all good things to the Lord because they are His and come from Him. "Let every creature in heaven and on earth, in the sea and in the depths," acknowledge God's sovereignty by rendering Him "praise, glory, honor and blessing" (2EpFid 61; RegNB 17:18).

3. *The Lord God*

A consequence of proclaiming God as Creator is acknowledging Him as sovereign Lord of all things. This title, which Francis used so frequently, shows how imprecise the general faithful were in naming God. In fact, they used the word "Lord" to refer to God in general and to each one of the Three Divine Persons in particular.

In popular medieval piety, the image of the feudal lord and of the German king were projected on God the Creator. God is *Dominus*, the Lord of all things, who distributes them prodigally among men and women while still retaining His sovereignty over them. If we try to appropriate them for ourselves, we are denying God's lordship, and we create false expectations because in the end, "that which (we) thought (we) had shall be taken away from (us)" (Adm 18:2). The right thing to do, then, is to respect God's ownership and thank Him for His generosity (2EpFid 61).

This medieval background helped Francis to understand God's sovereignty in the Lord-servant relationship. Obedience is due to the Lord, to whom everything belongs: that is, we must open our lives completely to Him so that He may take full possession of them. Consequently, the attitude of the servant must be that of bowing to the will of his Lord without interposing the obstacle of his own wishes. To insist on having our own way would be to assert our complete dominion over our own lives: it would be rebelling against God's sovereignty. True obedience, then, entails forgetting our own wishes and seeking to do only what God wants and what pleases Him (RegNB 22:9; EpOrd 50), and doing this, not as unwilling victims, but because we have discovered that our own true fulfillment lies hidden in the will of God.

In his Admonitions, Francis describes with masterly skill the attitude of the servant who offers his human will so that God's sovereignty may be made manifest. Here Francis describes subtly the servant's attitude towards His Lord, his readiness to do God's will in building up His kingdom.

Francis included in the term "Lord" another facet of God's sovereignty, namely, that He is Judge of the living and the dead, especially in reference to Christ. Popular medieval piety was very familiar with the image of the Lord as the Judge of history. For many years oral catechism had stressed this image, which was later repeated in the religious art on the apses and porticoes of abbeys and cathedrals. The distant majesty of the Judge of the Apocalypse gradually yielded to St. Matthew's picture of the Last Judgment (Mt 12:36), an image which Francis retained and to which he referred all human conduct, for the Lord who created us and from whose hands we came is the same Lord before whom we must appear in the evening of our lives (RegNB 4:6; EpCler 14).

4. *The Trinity*

The God of Francis's experience was not a far-off, eternal God but a living and true God, transcendent though He might be. This God, One and Three, offers us the possibility of fulfilling ourselves on the individual level as well as on the fraternal or collective level.

Invocation of God as Trinity was common in medieval piety and included all aspects of the Trinity, although naturally, popular devotion did not reach the same depths as the knowledge of the theologians. As the foundation of the Faith, the Trinity filled the whole life of the Church and even had some influence on the customs of society, as can be seen from the frequency with which the Trinity appeared in both civil and religious official documents and in certain social practices (RegNB Pro.1; L3S 29). Francis absorbed this Trinitarian tradition and deepened it to the point of making his whole life revolve around it. For him, believing in, proclaiming and adoring God as the

Trinity were the essential ways to respond in faith to God's loving offer of salvation.

Believing in the Trinitarian God is more than understanding the complicated system of essences and relationships which the theologians have elaborated, based on the definitions of the Church, and which the Fourth Lateran Council defines thus:

We firmly believe and sincerely confess that there is one sole true God, eternal, immense and immutable, incomprehensible, omnipotent and ineffable, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three persons but only one essence, substance or nature, altogether simple. The Father proceeds from no one, the Son proceeds from the Father alone, and the Holy Spirit proceeds equally from the one and the other. Without beginning and always without end, the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeds. They are consubstantially coequal, and equally omnipotent and coeternal.

Francis did not reject anything the Church taught, yet his faith had a popular undercurrent which distinguished it from such theological technicalities but which, at the same time, helped him to discern the practical dimensions of belief in the Trinity. We know the Trinity through the operations of the Three Person on our behalf. Hence, believing in the mystery beyond our conceptual acceptance of it by faith will translate into attitudes and actions that make it present and operative.

One of these actions is announcing the Trinity as the source from which our salvation flows (RegNB 21:2). Francis's life was marked by his enthusiasm for telling everybody, believers and unbelievers alike, what the kernel of his faith was — the saving action of the Triune God (RegNB 16:7).

In addition to feeling the need to preach about the Trinity, Francis also desired to praise and bless, to thank and adore the Lord God Almighty, Trinity in Unity, Father Son and Holy Spirit (RegNB 21:2; 23:10). This was a logical reaction, for he knew that the grace of salvation comes to us from God's hand, provided that we welcome Him gratefully and make our hearts His "home and dwelling place" (RegNB 22:27).

The inner life of the Trinity was a model for Francis because there he and his brothers could see how the members of a family should so love each other that they blend together into one (EpOrd 50-52).

5. *God the Father*

There are Three Persons in One God: the Father, from whom the Son proceeds, and the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Although there are Three Persons, the prayer which Christ Himself taught us as a model of prayer is addressed to the Father alone. Repeatedly Francis recommended the Our Father as the basic prayer of the Christian (2EpFid

21). Yet when he prayed alone, he rarely invoked God as Father. We may suspect that his turbulent relationship with his own father, Pietro Bernardone, may have influenced his attitude to God the Father, especially when we recall Celano's description of the judgment before the Bishop which ended with Francis declaring publicly: "From now on I can freely say: 'Our Father who art in heaven,' not, 'father Peter Bernardone'" (2Cel 12). But the real meaning of the Scripture passage does not appear to support this thesis.

For Francis, God is Father particularly in regard to His Son. In his Office of the Passion, he tells us what the Father was for Christ, rather than what the Father was for him. His own experience of the Divine Sonship led him to teach us about the Son's filial relationship with the Father. To show us who the Father is, he did not reveal his own feelings but referred us to those of Christ, since the Father is, first of all, the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," as St. Paul tells us (2 Cor 1:3). For Francis, our association with this Divine Sonship was a cause for awe and trembling. That is why he wished to show us "how glorious it is, how holy and great, to have a Father in heaven" (2EpFid 54).

Within the community of the Trinity, the Father is the One who takes the initiative towards our salvation. He is the Creator of all things spiritual and corporal (RegNB 23:1). He is also the Redeemer who caused his Son to be born of the Virgin Mary and willed that His death on the cross should be the instrument of our salvation (RegNB 23:3). Likewise, He is our Consoler and final Savior (ExpPat 1), who waits to gather us to His bosom at the end of time (RegNB 23:4).

Although the Father dwells in light inaccessible (Adm 1:5), He has made His love present to us through His Son, who became the way that leads to Him (Adm 1:1). Therefore, the example we should follow as sons of the Father must be the Divine Son who, from first to last, remained open in fidelity to the will of God, His Father.

6. *God the Son*

Art in general played an active and decisive role in forming the image of God—and of Christ—in popular medieval piety. On many medieval porticoes and apses, Christ is depicted in glory, seated at the right hand of the Father as Judge of the living and the dead, an image which inspired reverential fear and which was partly due to a certain amount of manipulation by the ruling classes.

As well as the image of Christ the Judge, there was also that of Christ the Teacher, surrounded by His Apostles and offering the world the book of the Word. If we include the image of Christ ascending into heaven and sending

down the Spirit on the Apostles, we shall have some idea of the strong element of transcendence in the medieval Christians' approach to the Lord.

Yet, as well as this image of Christ in glory, there was another one that complemented it. We are referring to the great crucifixes which hung over the altars of the Romanesque churches. At first, these showed the *Rex gloriae*, the King of Glory, but gradually they evolved towards the more pain-filled, more human, aspects of the crucifixion, paralleling the development of popular spirituality. The crucifix at San Damiano, which was so influential in crystallizing Francis's image of the Lord, is a synthesis of the two trends, for in it the "King of Glory" and the crucified Lord merge into one.

This means that Francis' image of God was a balanced one of "God-made-man," in which neither Christ's divinity nor His humanity was stressed. Francis always contemplated Christ in the context of the Trinity, in His relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, this does not mean that Francis saw Christ in far-off transcendence, but saw instead that Christ the Man, in whom God's mercy was made present among us, still shares in God's Divinity.

This brings up the same problem that arose when we were speaking about the "bi-polar" reality of God, that is, His transcendence and His immanence. But if we wish to continue our discussion as before, we shall have to make this division.

a) *Christ the Lord*

The usual way in which Francis expressed the Son's transcendence was to use the liturgical phrase: "through our Lord Jesus Christ." By this he showed that Christ is *Dominus*, "the Lord," who is seated beside the Father and shares in His Divinity.

The contemplation of Christ within the community of the Trinity allowed Francis to attribute to the Three Persons the wonders of salvation. He saw Christ as the Author of creation, of redemption—through His birth, death and resurrection—and of our final salvation; that is, he attributed to Christ the role of Creator (Adm 5:2f.), Redeemer and Savior (RegNB 16:7). So Francis saw that the Trinity is the essential foundation of the Faith.

Christ's role in creation was that of the Mediator (RegNB 23:1,3), through whom the Father acted. Yet Christ's mediation was not simply instrumental but also exemplary, especially in regard to mankind (Adm 5:1), for He was the First-born of creation (OffPass 15:4).

As Creator, Christ was also the re-Creator or Redeemer of our human condition, the glorious Savior who freed us once and for all by reconciling us with the Father (RegNB 16:7). As the Word of the Father (2EpFid 3), He came on earth among us to announce to us His will to save us (2EpFid 4), even

though He would have to suffer the pain of the Cross to do so (2EpFid 11f.). Yet God the Father did not abandon His Son to death but raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand, from where he shall judge mankind at the end of time (OffPass 9:1-3).

In a dark and evil world of blindness and falsehood, Francis saw Christ as the Light (2EpFid 66), the Truth (Adm 1:1), Wisdom (2EpFid 67), and the only Teacher (RegNB 1:1). Through Christ, the true knowledge of God is revealed to us so that we can discern what is best for our salvation, a knowledge which is acquired by receiving the Eucharist and living according to the teachings of the Faith (2EpFid 63-68). Once Francis had discovered Divine Wisdom at his conversion, he pursued it singlemindedly and was indifferent to the wisdom of the world (Adm 7).

Christ is the Lord who has done so much for us, but He also awaits us as our Judge, and so Francis adored Him with fear and reverence. Christ is the Lord because He is the Son of the Most High, and, like Him, deserves the praise and blessing of all the ages (EpOrd 3f.).

b) Christ the Servant

While Francis contemplated the Divinity of Christ with awe, his wonder was even greater when he considered that the Word of the Father, so exalted, so holy and so glorious, took on the flesh of our humanity and frailty in the womb of the Virgin Mary (2EpFid 4). He saw that this act of humility was continued in time because it is repeated every day when the Lord comes down among us from the bosom of the Father under the humble appearance of bread and wine (Adm 1:16-18).

The Incarnation made Christ the channel through which the saving goodness of God reaches us and the way along which we must travel, following in Christ's footsteps, until we meet the Father (Adm 1:2). Christ is the beloved Son for whom the Father shows His love and from whom He receives the same love in due measure (RegNB 23:5); Christ is thus the center of a double mediation—between the Father and us, and between us and the Father. Christ's intercession appears clearly in the Office of the Passion, in which Francis' voice yields to that of Christ so that He may address the Father. Francis took this image of Christ at prayer from St. John's Gospel, and in it we see the absolute confidence of the Son in the will of His Father in spite of darkness and pain (OffPass 1-5).

The Son beloved of the Father is also our Brother (2EpFid 56), who knows our frailties because He has borne them in His own flesh, so that, besides being our Judge, He is also our Intercessor (2EpFid 56), the Shepherd and Guardian who takes care of us and defends us (RegNB 22:32). God comes near to us in His Son: He who is the Lord of the universe made Himself a slave

and a Servant, an image beloved of Francis, who derived it, not from St. Paul's description of Christ's emptying himself (*kenosis*; Phil 2:5-11), but from St. John's narrative of Christ washing the Apostles' feet (Jn 13).

Jesus is the Servant who, as well as being at the service of others (Adm 4), offers Himself for them as the Suffering Servant by means of something as obscure and apparently as useless as pain (OffPass 7:8f.). Francis went to the extreme of picturing Christ as "a poor man and transient" (RegNB 9:5), images from popular piety which do not appear in the Synoptic Gospels. But the Servant reached the depth of humiliation when He was seen as "a worm," a term which Francis applied not only to Christ, but also to anyone in the state of sin, although in a totally different sense, of course (2EpFid 46).

As well as seeing Christ as a Shepherd, Francis also saw Him as a lamb (EpOrd 19), a very understandable picture because it occurs throughout the liturgy and particularly in Romanesque art, for example, the "Agnus Dei" in the Mass, and Beatus of Liébana's "Adoration of the Lamb." But Francis also saw Christ as the Lamb of the Apocalypse, showing both glory and suffering, and which for Francis represented the Suffering Servant and the Most High Lord (LaudHor 3). The Servant was not a mere memory for Francis who, as we said before, saw Him actually humbling Himself daily in the Eucharist, a mystery which caused Francis to exclaim:

O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! That the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under the little form of bread! Look, brothers, at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves, as well, that you may be exalted by Him (EpOrd 27f.).

Among the different images which Francis proposes to us to describe Christ as the manifestation of the Father we must also include the Word, which, like the Eucharist, was for him a bodily sign of the Son of God (EpCler 3), who, through the Spirit, offers life to us (Test 13).

From considering how Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant," Francis was utterly convinced that he himself was poor and insignificant, and he was ready to serve others in poverty and "minority," a conviction he put into practice by following Christ as a poor, suffering servant.

7. *God the Holy Spirit*

Francis's image of God the Holy Spirit shared the confusion of the ordinary Faithful about the subject, a confusion that can be seen from the way the Third Person of the Trinity appeared in the popular piety of the time. While we cannot claim to know what the medieval Christians understood about the Holy Spirit, we do know that Francis himself did not succeed in expressing in

precise theological terms his own profound experience of the Spirit of God. But, as we have already said, he was not a theologian.

The word "Spirit" had two principal meanings for Francis—the very life of the Trinity communicated to humanity, and the personification of this life in the Holy Spirit. In the first sense, Francis saw the Spirit of God as the inner, familial life of the Three Persons, which is beyond all human imagining and surmise. It is the life of Divine grace that surprises and disconcerts us when it makes itself present to us, since we neither hope nor suspect that it exists. It is the outpouring of plenitude beyond all desire. In short, it is the life of God offered to us (Adm. 1:1-7).

We know the richness of that life of grace, not because we may have succeeded in approaching close to God, but quite the contrary. It is this life which revealed itself to us as it drew near to us (1EpFid 6). We know what God is from what He has done and continues to do. The great wonders He has worked for us are the expression of His inner reality. The Creation, Redemption and Salvation are events which surpass all our possibilities and which, therefore, can be attributed only to the Spirit of God (RegNB 23:10).

Furthermore, this Spirit is a person. Through Him, the Word was made flesh (OffPass Ant.2); through Him, Christ is made present in the Eucharist and the Word (EpCler 2); and through Him, we are made dwelling places for the Trinity (2EpFid 48). Only the Spirit is capable of enabling us to participate in the life of God (Adm 12:1f.). All we have to do is not to hinder this action of the Spirit; instead, we should oppose the evil that wells up from the depths of our being (RegNB 17:14f.). Finally, we are not even capable of showing our gratitude by praising Him as He deserves (RegNB 23:5).

The Spirit's dwelling in us is not a mere passive presence. Francis saw Him as the Giver of Life (Adm 1:6), who enabled him to meet the demands of the Gospel. The Spirit is He who makes us understand, and helps us to achieve, what Christ came to teach us on behalf of his Father, namely, that we should let ourselves be transformed so that we can live according to the Beatitudes and abandon our old sinful ways, which can lead only to death (RegNB 17:9-16).

Francis' main thought when describing the action of the Holy Spirit was that the purpose of His presence is to reproduce in us the image of Christ. The Virgin Mary is the spouse of the Holy Spirit because, through Him, she conceived Christ in her womb (OffPass Ant.2). Similarly, we become spouses of the same Spirit when our "soul is joined to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit" (2EpFid 51).

For Francis, the Holy Spirit is He who makes possible the outpouring of Divine life upon us, opening our eyes and hearts so that we can follow Christ

in learning how to live according to God's will. In Christ, we see God's purpose for us, and we learn what we have to be for Him. Only the Holy Spirit can do that for us (EpCler 42).

Conclusion

Francis's image of God contained other attributes which are less commonly mentioned but which show the rich variety of ways in which he experienced God. In the form of a litany, especially in Chapter 23 of his first Rule and in his Praises of God, he lists one by one all the various facets of God that he saw and experienced. These are like the pieces with which he built up a great mosaic of his image of God. Unfortunately, the key to that composition has not come down to us.

These attributes, which we can call "minor" for want of a better term, are also important for our purpose because they are the material representation of Francis's experience of God, an experience which was not merely intellectual. To say that God is Beauty, Joy, Strength and Refreshment is to say that He is the complete fulfillment of all our spiritual and sensory longings. That is, for Francis, God was *all*: He who poured out on him an overflowing abundance of gifts and gave him infinitely more than he could ever have hoped for or even imagined.
