

Francis of Assisi, Imitator of Christ Crucified, God and Man, in the Franciscan and Capuchin Tradition

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The present study is limited to shedding some light on this essential point in the character of St. Francis, which is the least-studied in the Poverello’s writings. For this reason it seems necessary first to explain this neglect and show its importance in two great witnesses to the Franciscan tradition, St. Bonaventure and Ubertino of Casale. Then we will try to explain the impact of this vital aspect among the first Capuchins.

In so doing, we will find ourselves very close to an issue of major importance in the history of Christian mysticism, namely, the famous controversy on the place of Christ the God-Man in the highest mystical union. It is such a difficult issue that even St. Bernard, followed by Ruusbroec and his school, felt it necessary to speak of “going beyond” (*overhiden*) the humanity of Christ in order to be united to his divinity or to the Word-Spirit and thus achieve supremely the highest union with God.¹ Likewise, St. John of the Cross appears not to have given a clear solution to the problem, with the result that interpolations in his writings have been

¹Cf. A. Ampe, *Bernardus en Ruusbroec*, in *Ons Geest. Eft* 27 (1953) 150-54. The same thing should be noted in the *Pearl* and in the *Temple of our Soul*, two works influenced by Ruusbroec and profoundly christocentric. The teaching of Harphius is at least ambiguous on this point. Cf. L. Cognet, *Introduction aux mystiques rhéno-flamands*, Paris 1968, 94-97 (Eckhart), 139 (J. Tauler), 176-78 (Ruusbroec), 301-03, 312 (Harphius), 326-32 (*Pearl* and *Temple*) 340-41 (L. de Blois).

used to remedy the situation.² The question is really how to reconcile the highest mystical union with God, the immediate experience of his essence without images, with the presence of such images in our direct union with Christ, the God-Man, the one and only way to God?

Scholars readily acknowledge that St. Francis of Assisi was an example of the most consistent christocentrism in his teaching and life, which was crowned by the stigmata. The mystical theology of his union with Christ was celebrated by St. Bonaventure in a manner still considered valid today. After the Seraphic Doctor, and inspired by him, Ubertino of Casale delved more deeply into this theme, basing his entire christocentric doctrine on the hypostatic union of Christ the God-Man as the vital center of all Christian mystical union. The influence of this christocentric mysticism continues until the time of Benet of Canfield.

The mysticism of Canfield and his school is based entirely on Christ crucified, God and Man, as inherited from St. Francis and St. Bonaventure, of whom the chronicles of the Order speak at length. But it is precisely here that a serious historical problem occurs today. For some years scholars have defended Orcibal's thesis, which is accepted by nearly all specialists today. He says that this mystical christocentrism, which he calls Franciscan, is missing in Canfield's original work. It was supposedly added only later because of the difficulties caused by criticism of his *Exercise of the Will of God* (the future *Rule of Perfection*), whose manuscripts were already circulating in France and elsewhere at the end of the sixteenth century. This thesis has been propagated again in two magisterial studies, one by Porteman, who accepts Orcibal's thesis, and the other by Orcibal himself in his critical edition of the *Rule of Perfection*, which contains an important critical apparatus.³

Actually, this historical problem is not of that much interest to us in itself. But considering the central place of Christ crucified in Christian mysticism in general, and Franciscan mysticism in particular, we feel it necessary to deal with this question by situating it within the entire doctrine of Canfield and his school. At the same time we hope to illustrate some less-known aspects of Franciscan mystical christocentrism, starting with St. Francis and ending with Benet of Canfield and his school. As we shall see,

²DS VII (1968-69) 1106-07 (Tomas de la Cruz); XI (1982) 1044; cf. K. Porteman, *De mystieke Lyriek van Lucas van Mechelen (1595/96-1652)*, Ghent 1978, 422 (17).

³K. Porteman, op.cit. II, 419 and passim; J. Ordical, *Benoît de Canfield. La Règle de Perfection. The Rule of Perfection. Edition critique et annotée*, Paris, Edition Presses universitaires de France, 1982; Introduction: 16-39.

this christocentrism is centered on the God-Man, the crucified Christ, experienced by St. Francis and transmitted to his brothers. For now we will consider the theme in the doctrine of St. Francis, St. Bonaventure, Ubertino of Casale, and the first Capuchins. A future study will deal with Benet of Canfield and his school.

I. St. Francis

For a proper understanding of the christocentrism of Francis, we must first realize that he always sees Christ—and the same must be said of the Virgin Mary—in his close union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and therefore in a trinitarian context.⁴ For him Christ is the Son of the Father, whose mission he accomplishes and whom he obeys. Secondly, Francis contemplates Christ in his entire saving mystery. Without limiting himself to the crucified Christ, he never ceases to follow him in his entire salvific life, from his origin as Word of the Father. Christ shares in the work of creation together with the Holy Spirit. In him, the Father's beloved Son, the Father has formed human beings: their body in the image of his Son and their spirit in his likeness (Adm V, 1-2). Francis follows the Son of the Father, who became human by his earthly birth, who lived among us and suffered on the cross to rise from the dead, all the way to his ascension into heaven and his glorious return at the end of time. This paschal mystery of Christ continues forever in the presence of the crucified and risen Christ in the Church, in his sacraments, especially the Eucharist, in his words, which give Spirit and life, in the priesthood, in the souls of the faithful who have become children of the Father, spouses of the Holy Spirit, brothers and mothers of the Son in the Spirit of the Lord (indwelling of the Trinity), in the poor, and finally in all of creation. Filled with joy, St. Francis never ceases to sing and celebrate Christ in his entire paschal mystery, with all people on earth and with the saints in heaven, inviting all to join him and his

⁴This short summary of the "trinitarian" christocentrism of St. Francis is based largely on the analytic studies of O. Schmucki, used by other authors, one of the best being Nguyen-Van-Khanh, *Le Christ dans la pensée de St. François d'Assise d'après ses Ecrits* (Edition polycopiée), Paris 1976 [English trans: *The Teacher of His Heart*, St. Bonaventure, NY 1994]; cf. also C.M. Teixeira, *Deus na experiência pessoal de S. Francisco de Assis*, in AA.VV., *L'esperienza di Dio in Francesco d'Assisi*. ed. E. Covi, Rome 1982, 196-232 (summary of his doctoral thesis at the Franciscan Institute of Spirituality at the Antonianum, Rome, entitled: *L'immagine del Dio vivo. Lineamenti fondamentali della visione di Dio negli scritti di S. Francesco d'Assisi* (still in manuscript form)); L. Lehmann, *Der universale Grundzug im Beten und Wirken des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi. Eine Analyse seiner Gebete und Briefe*. Rome 1982 (doctoral thesis, also for the Antonianum; manuscript); id., "Gratias agimus tibi." *Structure and content of chapter XXIII of the Regula non bullata*, in AA.VV., *L'esperienza di Dio*, 312-75.

brothers in praising, thanking, and blessing the Lamb who was slain and is exalted, the Son of the Father, who was, who is, and who is to come.⁵

Special attention should be paid to the heretofore little-noticed fact that Francis never speaks of Christ in his humanity alone, as people liked to think of him before and after Francis, in the Middle Ages, and to some extent today. But for Francis Christ is always the Son of the Father, the God-Man, equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, the second Person of the blessed Trinity. He sees and experiences Christ in his hypostatic union as Son of the Father, as a divine Person incarnate, the God-Man. And this in the Holy Spirit. This vital principle is so essential for him that he admits no exception.⁶

Since this point is so essential for our subject, we must analyze it in greater detail.

To see the Father, in the Spirit, through the Son

Francis himself speaks of this principle in *Admonition I*, which deals with the possibility of knowing the Father in the Son, according to the text of John 14, 6-9: "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me. If you knew me, you would also know my Father.... Philip, whoever sees me sees my Father as well." To know the Father who is Divine-Spirit, and who as Spirit gives divine life, we must know the Son as Divine-Spirit and thus equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, in other words, as the Spirit, as the God-Man, in his divine Person, as Son of the Father. Only in this way can Christ, Son of the Father, Divine-Spirit like the Father and the Holy Spirit, give us eternal life in his Body and Blood. Indeed, we receive the eucharistic Christ in the Spirit of the Lord. In the same way, the apostles had to see the earthly Christ with the eyes of the

⁵Certain aspects of this summary are explained in O. Schmucki, *Gotteslob und Meditation nach Beispiel und Anweisung des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*, Lucerne 1980 (with bibliography); Optatus van Asseldonk, *Insegnamenti biblici "privilegiati" negli scritti di San Francesco d'Assisi*, in *Anal. OFM Cap* 95 (1979) 146-65 [English trans: "Favored Biblical Teachings in the Writings of St. Francis of Assisi." GR 3:3 (1989) 287-314]; also in *Lettura biblico-teologica delle "Fonti francescane"*, ed. G. Cardaropoli and M. Conti, Rome 1979, 83-116; id., *Il Crocifisso di San Damiano visto et vissuto da S. Francesco*, in *Laur.* 21 (1981) 453-76; also in *Anal. OFM Cap* 97 (1981) 374-88; id., *Maria, sposa dello Spirito Santo*, in *AA.VV., L'esperienza di Dio* 414-23. For the writings of Francis, we are following the critical edition by K. Esser.

⁶This point has been studied especially by Nguyen-Van-Khanh, *Le Christ*. A major summary of the book is found in: O. van Asseldonk, *Altri aspetti giovannei negli scritti di s. Francesco*, in *Antonianum* 54 (1979) 455-70.

Spirit as Son of the Father, God-Man. Thus, concludes Francis, the Lord remains with us always.

Now, I think, we can better grasp the deeper meaning of *Admonition* I. In the Spirit of the Lord we see; we believe, and we see the Son of the Father.

The Father dwells in inaccessible light, and God is spirit, and no one has ever seen God. Therefore he cannot be seen except in the Spirit because it is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer. But because he is equal to the Father, the Son is not seen by anyone other than the Father or other than the Holy Spirit. All those who saw the Lord Jesus according to the humanity, therefore, and did not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Divinity that he is the true Son of God were condemned. Now in the same way, all those...who do not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Divinity that it is truly the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, are condemned.... It is the Spirit of the Lord...who lives in its faithful, who receives the Body and Blood of the Lord. All others who do not share in this same Spirit.... As [the apostles] saw only his flesh by an insight of their flesh, yet believed that he was God as they contemplated him with their spiritual eyes, let us...see and believe.... I am with you...⁷

That St. Francis really saw the Son of the Father, God and Man, in the Eucharist is also shown from his *Testament*, where he speaks of priests in whom he sees the Son of God: "And I act in this way because, in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except his most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others" (Test 10). The word "corporally" reminds us of Colossians 2:9, where Paul describes Christ according to the flesh, in whom dwells the fullness of the divinity. The *Exhortation to the Clergy* I, 3 repeats this expression, adding that we have nothing of the Most High except his Body and Blood, his names and words "through which we have been made and redeemed from death to life." Thus Francis speaks of Christ as Creator and Redeemer in the Eucharist and his words (cf. Adm V, 1-3; LtOrd 3-11).

In the Eucharist Francis sees the Lord God, who alone acts there, saying, "Do this in memory of me" (LtOrd 15-16). And so priests must see there the Son of God, the Lamb of God, sanctified in his own Blood, who is offered to us as grace of the Spirit (18-19). As God (cf. 1 Pt 1:12), he is the

⁷For a more detailed explanation of *Admonition* I, cf. Van Asseldonk, *Lo spirito del Signore e la sua santa operazione negli scritti di Francesco*, in AA.VV., *L'esperienza di Dio*, 177-84 [English trans. "The Spirit of the Lord and Its Holy Activity in the Writings of Francis," GR 5:1 (1991) 105-58].

Holy One who dwells in the glory of heaven (22-24) and on the altar in the hands of a priest:

Christ the Son of the living God! O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation he hides himself under an ordinary piece of bread! Brothers, look at the humility of God... (26-28).

Throughout this passage Francis is thinking of Christ, God and Man, Son of the Father: "One everywhere, he acts as he pleases, with the Lord God the Father and the Holy Spirit the Paraclete for ever and ever. Amen" (33-34).⁸

Francis's preferred title for God, which he almost always uses also to refer to Christ, is "Lord." That we know Christ and believe in him as Lord, is expressly confessed in the words of St. Paul: "The apostle says: *No one can say: Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit; and: There is not one who does good, not even one*" (Adm VIII; cf. SalBVM). By the fire of the Holy Spirit we can actually follow in the footprints of the Son to the Father, to the Trinity and Unity:

Almighty, eternal, just, and merciful God, give us miserable ones the grace to do for you alone what we know you want us to do and always to desire what pleases you. Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened, and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, may we be able to follow in the footprints of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and, by your grace alone, may we make our way to you, Most High, who live and rule in perfect Trinity and simple Unity, and are glorified God almighty, forever and ever. Amen (LtOrd 50-52).

In this text, which is a prayer at the end of the *Letter to the Order*, we can attain the "holy Unity" of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which Francis

⁸At the beginning of the *Letter to the Order*, Francis already says of Christ: "...greetings in him who has redeemed and washed us in his most precious blood. When you hear his name, the name of the Son of the Most High, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, adore his name..." (3-4). He continues, saying that his brothers, sons, and lords, must obey the voice of the Son of God, bearing witness to him throughout the world "in word and deed," so that all may know "that there is no one who is all-powerful except him...and [you must] fulfill what you have promised him. The Lord God offers himself to us as to his children." Given the context, the entire text must refer to Christ. Clearly, it is a question of the Son as God. Note the expressions *his*, *to him*, *him*, repeated seven times. We find the same idea in the *Office of the Passion* VI, 14-15: "See, see that I am God, says the Lord.... Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel who has redeemed the souls of his servant with his very own most holy Blood..." (cf. VI, 9-11).

mentions at the beginning of the same letter: "In the name of the most high Trinity and holy Unity: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The saint celebrates this solemnly in the *Earlier Rule* XXIII, which is a kind of universal liturgical hymn. The Son occupies a central, mediatory place. In this Magna Carta of the Franciscan fraternity, in minority ("all of us lesser brothers"), addressed to all heaven and earth, Francis thanks the holy Father, because he has created everything through his Son with the Holy Spirit; because he brought about the birth of his Son *as true God and true man* by the blessed virgin Mary and saved us by his death on the cross; because he will cause his Son to come again at the last judgment. Thus Francis celebrates the entire paschal mystery (1-4). Then he asks the Son, our Lord, together with the Holy Spirit, to thank the Father "for everything as it pleases you and him, who always satisfies you in everything, through whom you have done so much for us. Alleluia" (5). He also asks the blessed virgin Mary and all the saints, in heaven and on earth, of all times, to thank the Father with the Son and Holy Spirit for all this, "because of your love." Finally, he invites everyone to desire nothing else but to please the Creator, Redeemer, and Savior, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the fullness of good who alone is good, to whom be all glory and thanks for ever. Thus Christ, God and Man, Son of the Father, with the Holy Spirit, is at the center of his thanksgiving, united to all heaven and earth.⁹

Finally, we find a very strong argument in the *Office of the Passion*, where Francis celebrates the Son of the Father, holy and all-holy, who prays in his passion to be delivered from evil and receive help to conquer death in his resurrection and ascension. Here Francis celebrates with heaven and earth the entire paschal mystery of Christ, the Lamb who was slain and exalted, God and Son of God, until his return in glory at the end of time. And he does this with the Mother of Christ, daughter and servant of the Father, spouse of the Holy Spirit, mother of the Son, our Lord and Teacher (Antiphon).¹⁰ Even in *Admonition* V, which speaks of our only glory in the cross, he offers us a Christ, Son of the Father, in whose image we were created according to the body, and in whose likeness according to the spirit. Christ is the "Creator," crucified for our sins, in whom we find our only glory in carrying his cross.¹¹

⁹Cf. Lehmann, *Der universale Grundzug*.

¹⁰ Along with the studies of Schmucki (cf. note 5), see my rather summary information in: *Insegnamenti biblici*, 16-17.

¹¹The entire text reads: "Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for he created and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body and to his likeness according to the Spirit. And all creatures under heaven serve, know, and obey their Creator, each according to its

In the Spirit, the words of Christ, Word of the Father, give us life

In the same way, Francis finds the trinitarian life of the Father and Son in the Holy Spirit in the words of Christ. We know how he sees the divine words of sacred Scripture as *spirit and life*. In this teaching he repeats the words of St. John and St. Paul on the Spirit who gives life. St. John speaks of it in his Gospel: "It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63). And the spirit who gives life, according to St. John, is the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son as the Spirit of truth, who reveals to us the entire mystery of the Father and Son, their divine life in trinitarian unity, in which we participate, according to Chapter 17 of the same Gospel, a chapter that entered deeply into Francis's teaching and life. The saint reveals something of this in the *Second Letter to the Faithful*, when he writes that he wishes to administer the fragrant words of his Lord, sent by the Father to become incarnate of the virgin Mary and celebrate the Passover, instituting the Eucharist and shedding his blood on the cross; the Son "through whom all things were made" (4-13), and who, as Good Shepherd, prayed for us to his Father, saying, "Holy Father" (56-60).

In the *Earlier Rule* XXII, he explains in depth the vital place of these divine words in our hearts. They enable us to live the trinitarian life, which is threatened by the evil spirit who also seeks to dwell there, opposed to the indwelling of the Father and Son in the Spirit of truth, who enables us to adore him in truth with clean hearts.¹² Francis ends with Chapter 17 of St. John, after inviting us to believe and live Christ, the Son of the holy Father:

The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let us, therefore, hold onto the words, the life, the teaching and the holy Gospel of him who humbles himself to beg his Father for us.... Father glorify...your Son...that they also may be sanctified in truth...that they may be brought to perfection as one... (41-53).

In *Admonition* VII Francis explains the words of St. Paul: "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). The divine words do not bring life except through the Spirit who causes them to live in those who receive them as God's gift and return them to him, the source of all good, by being faithful to them in their life: "Brought to life by the spirit of the divine

own nature, better than you. And even the demons did not crucify him, but you, together with them, have crucified him and are still crucifying him by delighting in vices and sins."

¹²Cf. W. Egger, "*Verbum in corde – Cor ad Deum.*" *Analyse und Interpretation von RegNB XXII*, in AA.VV., *L'esperienza*, 303-11.

letter.” The Spirit causes them to live in the hearts of those who truly receive these gifts of God, becoming in this way Spirit of divine life: the life of the Spirit in us. The words of this Admonition, which a modern scripture scholar calls a veritable treatise in hermeneutics,¹³ are worth citing. We will understand them better if we recall that for St. Paul and St. Francis the letter (the flesh or the body) without the Spirit is opposed, just as egotistical self-love is opposed to the Spirit of the Lord, the giver of Christ’s life in us.¹⁴

The apostle says: *The letter kills, but the spirit gives life*. Those people are put to death by the letter who only wish to know the words alone, that they might be esteemed wiser than others and be able to acquire great riches to give to their relatives and friends. And those religious are put to death by the letter who are not willing to follow the spirit of the divine letter but, instead, wish only to know the words and to interpret them for others. And those people are brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter who do not attribute every letter they know, or wish to know, to the body but, by word and example, return them to the most high Lord God to whom every good belongs.

Elsewhere, Francis speaks at least twice of the Holy Spirit as the source of all good (Adm VIII; SalBVM 6).

The Spirit of the Lord gives us the indwelling Trinity, a share in the personal life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Francis explicitly says that it is the Spirit of the Lord that enables us to live in an intimate relationship with the Trinity, as children of the Father, spouses of the Holy Spirit, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. He speaks of this in the two versions of the *Letter to the Faithful*. The real subject there is our sanctification in the unity of the Trinity, inspired by Chapter 17 of St. John (“sanctified in truth”). It is the sublime and supreme ideal for all the penitents and brothers.¹⁵

And the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon all those men and women who have done and persevered in these things and it will make a home and dwelling place in them. And they will be the children of the heavenly Father, whose works they do. And they are spouses, brothers, and mothers

¹³Cf. F. Manns, *François d'Assise, exégète. Introduction: vrai ou faux problème*, in AA.VV., *Francesco d'Assisi nel 750 della morte*, Jerusalem 1976, 201-24; R. Bartolini, *La presenza dello Spirito Santo negli Scritti di San Francesco d'Assisi*, Assisi 1981, 42-5.

¹⁴On the similarity between Francis and Paul on this point, cf. my study: *Lo Spirito del Signore*, 156-63.

¹⁵Cf. *ibid.* 165-76.

of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of his Father who is in heaven; mothers when we carry him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example. O how glorious and holy and great to have a Father...such a Spouse...such a Son: our Lord Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for his sheep and prayed to his Father, saying: Holy Father...bless and sanctify them. I sanctify myself for them that they may be sanctified in being one as we are one.

Francis (and Clare) also state that we share in the spiritual motherhood of Christ with the blessed Virgin made Church, becoming, like her, daughters and servants of the Father, spouses of the Holy Spirit, and mothers of Christ; receiving, like her, all the holy virtues through the Holy Spirit (Ant OfP; FormViv; SalBVM; 3LtAg).

In this context we understand better the words of the *Earlier Rule* about spiritual observance, to which all the brothers must submit, and about the Spirit of the Lord, to be desired above all things because he is, as Francis says elsewhere, the minister general of the Order (2C 193). Indeed, they must live the *Rule* and *Testament* in the same Spirit of the Lord, simply and plainly, without "carnal" gloss, for it is he who inspired them and revealed them to Francis.¹⁶

The Spirit of the Lord (LR X), through his holy activity, enables us to pray with pure hearts, to have patience and humility in persecution and infirmity, and even to love our enemies. In other words, he enables us to follow the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ crucified, the Good Shepherd, the Lamb who was slain and is exalted, who gives his life for us that we may follow him (Adm VI; ER XXII, 2-4 and 32-55; OfP; 2LtF 13 and 61-2). And Francis feels so certain about this Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ that he wants us to find no glory or joy except in his cross (Adm V; TPJ; ABF 8). True and perfect joy!

In the *Earlier Rule* XVII, he describes in detail how the spirit of the flesh, egotistical self-love, is opposed to the sanctifying activity of the Spirit of the Lord who introduces us to the trinitarian virtues. In this chapter he gives the law of life for all his brothers—those who preach, those who pray and those who work.¹⁷ Francis stresses in a very concrete way how this Spirit of the Lord is put into practice in daily life. In the *Later Rule* V he exhorts us to make sure that all temporal things—work, preaching, and study—

¹⁶Ibid. 140-56.

¹⁷Ibid. 156-64.

contribute to the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion, who inspires us to true prayer with a pure heart. He explains this in *Admonition XIV*, saying that those who are truly poor in spirit, when they pray, strip themselves of all self-love in loving their enemies. In the *Earlier Rule V*, 13-5, he says that the brothers, through the charity of the Spirit, must serve and obey one another voluntarily, thus practicing the true obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in the *Salutation of Virtues* he exhorts the brothers, in the obedience of the Spirit, sister of holy Charity, to be subject to all people and all creatures, for this is the summit of all the virtues.¹⁸

Such a person truly lives “without anything of his own” and does not become angry or disturbed at anything except through charity on account of sin (Adm XI). To have the Spirit of God we must not exalt at the good the Lord performs in us, but return it to him alone and esteem ourselves as the smallest, the least of all (Adm XII). This is God’s “servant” who follows the Lord, his Shepherd, in tribulation, persecution, weakness, and temptation (Adm VI), preserving peace in suffering out of love of our Lord Jesus Christ (Adm XV).

We are told how Francis himself lived in the Spirit of his Lord Jesus Christ, poor and crucified, his only joy and glory, in *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 105 and in the *Assisi Compilation* 79. During his last illnesses, suffering all over, his only desire is to be consoled by the sweetness of the divine words of sacred Scripture, totally identified as he was with the poor and crucified Christ: “I know Christ, poor and crucified” (2C 105). And to a minister he said: “Brother, every day I find so much sweetness and consolation in my memory from meditating on the humility of the footprints of the Son of God that, if I were to live till the end of the world, I’d have no great need to hear or meditate on other passages of Scripture” (AC 79). In suffering and patient union with the crucified Christ we find true joy, true virtue and the salvation of our soul (TPJ 15). Or, as it is written in the *Deeds of Saint Francis and His Companions*, it is there that we find the best of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

We have already seen that Francis lived the entire paschal mystery of Christ, namely, the “blessed Passion” of the Son of the Father in the Spirit, celebrating it in union with all creation on earth and in heaven. This is the “blessed Passion” he saw in the San Damiano crucifix at the beginning of his evangelical vocation, a liturgical celebration of which the *Earlier Rule XXIII* can give us an idea. But its trinitarian and mystical depth cannot be

¹⁸Ibid. 187-95.

¹⁹Ibid. 153-6.

fully revealed except through his *Praises of God*, immediately after he received the stigmata:

You are holy Lord God who does wonderful things. You are strong. You are great. You are the most high. You are the almighty king. You holy Father, King of heaven and earth. You are three and one, the Lord God of gods; you are the good, all good, the highest good, Lord God living and true. You are love, charity; you are wisdom, you are humility, you are patience, you are beauty, you are meekness, you are security, you are rest, you are gladness and joy, you are our hope, you are justice, you are moderation, you are all our riches to sufficiency. You are beauty, you are meekness, you are the protector, you are our custodian and defender, you are strength, you are refreshment. You are our hope, you are our faith, you are our charity, you are all our sweetness, you are our eternal life: Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior.

Indeed, he is our all, our sufficiency: "You are all our riches to sufficiency." Here we see Francis, bearing the stigmata, in and through Christ crucified united to the Father, three and one. We see his *transitus* or mystical passage with Christ crucified in the Spirit to the Father, of which St. Bonaventure speaks in his *Itinerarium*. But before him, Celano had already described for us Francis dead and living as another Christ (1C 112-4), that is, one person with Christ in the unity of the Spirit: "Whoever clings to God becomes one spirit with him, and that God will be all in all" (2C 219).

II. St. Bonaventure

The important influence of Bonaventure on Christian and Franciscan spirituality is recognized by all. Scholars agree that it is a peak that has not yet been surpassed.²⁰ His influence in history is undoubtedly extraordinary, we could even say exceptional. From the end of the thirteenth century until the nineteenth century he was the "common doctor" of Christian spirituality. Leo XIII calls him "the prince of mystics." We have discussed his doctrine elsewhere.²¹ Here it is enough to stress some of distinctive features that are more important for our subject. I am referring to his mystical christocentrism, which became particularly widespread in Christian and Franciscan tradition.

²⁰This is the opinion of E. Gilson confirmed by E. Longpré. Cf. O. van Asseldonk, *De momento S. Bonaventurae pro vita spirituali*, in *Laur.* 15 (1974) 387.

²¹Cf. O. van Asseldonk, *La spiritualité franciscaine du 16^e au 18^e siècle*, in *Laur.* 21 (1980) 95-100 (with bibliography); for Leo XIII cf. id., *De momento*, 385, note 1.

The absolute center of this mysticism is Christ, the uncreated, incarnate and inspired Word of the Father,²² the vital mediator of the entire work of creation and redemption, led by the Father in his Son, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Evangelical perfection, common to all Christians, consists in intimate union with God in the crucified Christ, through mystical ecstasy, which enables us to undertake or undergo (*patri*) a pascal passage (*transitus*) with him to the Father, in the Holy Spirit.²³

This journey is presented as a "reduction" or unifying re-formation of all creatures in the overflowing unity of the personal God from whom they proceed. God is the personalized love of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit (*caritas-bonitas*), who communicates himself (*bonum est diffusivum sui*) in Christ, incarnate love, who in and through him returns or is "reduced" to the Father in the Holy Spirit, bringing all creatures with him. This reintegration or circulation of trinitarian love has also been called re-creation according to divine influence, an alternation between *egressus* and *regressus*, unifying the universe. This terminology, which derives from Pseudo-Dionysius, characterizes Bonaventure's mysticism, insofar as it is centered on the crucified Christ. It spread throughout the entire West under his influence, although the place of Christ was often an occasion of doubt and debates among the mystical currents.

This "reduction" to trinitarian unity in Christ through the Holy Spirit was and is seen in an atmosphere of love, as a divine *habitus* in the Spirit, a spiration, a breath of mutual love, manifesting itself harmoniously in fruitional and active love (the contemplative and active life), as the summit of perfection. Spiration of trinitarian love in the Holy Spirit finds its vital center in Christ, God and Man, incarnate-crucified love, who becomes for Bonaventure the single mediator of everything, the heart of God, the Church, humanity, the whole world. The universe is the theophany of love toward which all things are directed and through which all return or are "reduced" in unity to the Father in the Spirit.

²²Gerken and Stoevesant emphasize deeper study of the importance of the inspired Word. Cf. A. Gerken, *Theologie des Wortes. Das Verhältnis von Schöpfung und Inkarnation bei Bonaventura*, Düsseldorf 1963; H. Stoevesandt, *Die letzten Dinge in der Theologie Bonaventuras*, Zürich 1969, 376-8. According to this author, Bonaventure teaches that the inspired Word in our souls reveals to us all that the uncreated and incarnate Word has done. In this sense, the inspired Word is the key idea of all Bonaventurian mystical theology. According to Gerken, Bonaventure, like St. Francis, already sees the glory (*doxa*) of the Lord in the cross, drawing inspiration from St. John's Gospel (chap. 17): *Das Verhältnis von Schöpfungs- und Erlösungsordnung im Itinerarium mentis in Deum des hl. Bonaventura*, in *S. Bonaventura*, ed. J.G. Bougerol, IV, Grottaferrata (Rome) 1974, 306-10.

²³Cf. my study, cited above: *De momento*, 386-95.

This "reduction" is also called the circle of divine love, the circulation of love in unity or communication.²⁴ Bonaventure sees it as the way in the trinitarian unity of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit:

Just as the Father and the Son are joined and united to one another through the bond of love, so human beings, clinging to God through charity, become one in spirit. That is why it says in the Gospel of St. John (17:22-23): "That they may become perfectly one as we are one."²⁵

Francis, bearing the stigmata, becomes the perfect example for all the world of this trinitarian love, centered on Christ, God and Man, crucified, who lives in the Eucharist to give us this love. Thus Francis is the model of every mystical ascent or passage (*transitus*) from this world to the Father in Christ, the Lamb who was slain and exalted, in order to celebrate the eternal wedding feast.

One text that shows the vital place held by Christ, the God-Man and incarnate Word, is found in the *Soul's Journey into God*. Here it is a question of Christ's personal union with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Christ is sent by the Father and the Holy Spirit, but always with them, never separated from them. He is always the God-Man: "[I]n comparison with the super wonderful union of God and man in the unity of the person of Christ" (VI, 4; cf. 5); "[I]n Christ personal union exists with a trinity of substances and a duality of natures" (6).

In this consideration is the perfection of the mind's illumination when, as if on the sixth day of creation, it sees human beings made to the image of God. For if an image is an expressed likeness, when our mind contemplates in Christ the Son of God, who is the image of the invisible God by nature, our humanity so wonderfully exalted, so ineffably united, when at the same time it sees united the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the center, the Alpha and the Omega, the caused and the cause, the Creator and the creature, that is, the book written within and

²⁴On the doctrine of the circle, which derives from Pseudo-Dionysius, and its cosmic importance in Bonaventure's doctrine, cf. H. Stoevesandt, *Die letzten Dinge*, 346-65. One of the most outstanding texts: "Grace is rightly called a flowing river...because, when the soul enters, its flow exceeds that of any fountain. Nor does it cease or stand still, but it flows out and back. It flows out from God and causes us to flow back into God, according to the property of water, which not only rises in a cascade but also falls" (*Comm. in Io.* c. VII, n. 56; cited in Stoevesandt, *ibid.* 358-9).

²⁵Text cited by J. Châtillon, *Le primat de la vertu de charité dans la théologie de saint Bonaventure*, in *San Bonaventura, maestro di vita francescana e di sapienza cristiana*, ed. A. Pompei, III, Rome 1976, 230. The text is found in : *III Sent.* d. 27, a. 2, q. 1 (III, 604a).

without, it now reaches something perfect. It reaches the perfection of its illuminations on the sixth stage, as if with God on the sixth day of creation; nor does anything more remain except the day of rest on which through mystical ecstasy the mind's discernment comes to rest from all the work which it has done.²⁶

The typical expression is, "It sees united the first and the last." The summit of mystical union in ecstasy takes place in the mediator between God and human beings, Jesus Christ crucified, who by reason of this *transitus* or passover is the way and the door, the ladder and the vehicle, the mercy seat placed above the Ark of God and the mystery hidden from the beginning (VII, 1).

Whoever turns his face fully to the mercy seat and with faith, hope and love, devotion, admiration, exultation, appreciation, praise, and joy beholds him hanging upon the cross, such a one makes the Pasch, that is, the passover, with Christ. By the staff of the cross he passes over the Red Sea, going from Egypt into the desert, where he will taste the hidden manna; and with Christ he rests in the tomb, as if dead to the outer world, but experiencing, as far as is possible in this wayfarer's state, what was said on the cross to the thief who adhered to Christ: *Today you shall be with me in paradise* (2).

Here Francis appears as the perfect model of consummate mystical union:

This was shown also to blessed Francis when in ecstatic contemplation on the height of the mountain—where I thought out these things I have written—there appeared to him a six-winged seraph fastened to a cross, as I and several others heard in that very place from his companion who was with him then. There he passed over into God in ecstatic contemplation and became an example of perfect contemplation as he had previously been of action, like another Jacob and Israel, so that through him, more by example than by word, God might invite all truly spiritual men to this kind of passing over and spiritual ecstasy (3).

This passage can only be the work of the Holy Spirit:

In this passing over, if it is to be perfect, all intellectual activities must be left behind and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and transformed into God. This, however, is mystical and most secret, which no one knows except the one who receives it, no one receives except the

²⁶[We are using the translation by Ewert Cousins, *The Soul's Journey into God*, New York 1978, with a few minor changes – trans.].

one who desires it, and no one desires except the one who is inflamed in his very marrow by the fire of the Holy Spirit whom Christ sent into the world. And therefore the Apostle says that this mystical wisdom is revealed by the Holy Spirit (4).

In order to experience (*pati*) this action of the Holy Spirit, the soul must allow him to put to death every purely human operation, whether of the intellect or imagination, in order that the super essential divine activity may carry out its unifying work in us. This "mystical death" signifies our passage with Christ crucified from this world to the Father.

Before citing the essential text, we should note that history shows us how hard it has been to explain the "death" of images, especially of Christ crucified, in the highest mystical union. St. Bonaventure says only that we must pass *with* Christ to the Father, without saying explicitly that we must pass from his humanity to his divinity, or from the Word to the Father, as many mystical writers such as St. Bernard have said. Bonaventure remains faithful to Christ the God-Man, *in whom* we shall find the Father. But he does not explain, concretely, how images must disappear, except that he attributes it to divine activity. We shall see how Benet of Canfield strives to resolve the problem. Bonaventure describes supreme union as follows:

This fire is God, and his furnace is in Jerusalem; and Christ enkindles it in the heat of his burning passion, which only the one who truly perceives who says: *My soul chooses hanging and my bones death*. Whoever loves this death can see God because it is true beyond doubt that *no one will see me and live*. Let us, then, die and enter into the darkness; let us impose silence upon our cares, our desires and our imaginings. With Christ crucified let us pass *out of this world to the Father* so that when the Father is shown to us, we may say with Philip: *It is enough for us*. Let us hear with Paul: *My grace is sufficient for you*. Let us rejoice with David saying: *My flesh and my heart have grown faint; you are the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion forever. Blessed by the Lord forever and all the people will say: Let is be; let it be. Amen* (6).

All this takes place in the love of God and neighbor, in charity, which is the fulfillment of the law:

These two [commandments] are signified in the one spouse of the Church, Jesus Christ, who is at the same time our neighbor and God, brother and lord, king and friend, the Word uncreated and incarnate, our maker and remaker, the Alpha and Omega, who is also the supreme hierarch, who purifies, illumines and perfects his spouse, that is, the entire Church and every holy soul (IV, 5).

III. Ubertino of Casale

Influenced by Bonaventure, Angela of Foligno, Olivi, and others, Ubertino of Casale in his *Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus* preaches a christocentric mysticism that is clearly Franciscan. It has been very influential inside and outside the Order, even though it is not yet sufficiently known.²⁷ This mysticism is centered explicitly and completely on the mystery of Christ, God and Man, whose hypostatic union serves as the vital principle of our spiritual union with God. Frequently commenting on the text of St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20), Ubertino presents the entire Christian life as an intimate union with the mystery of the incarnate and crucified God-Man in all the states and acts he has lived eternally and continues to live after his ascension into heaven, for and in the members of his body, the Church, especially in the Eucharist. This life, which is both "Christic" and "Marian," grows more intense in the loving union with Christ and his Mother that is shared by the souls in his Mystical Body.²⁸ Christ crucified, the God-Man, is the unique center of the universe, which is called to praise, adore and thank him in pure love, a love motivated solely by his will and glory, solely for the honor of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.

This entire work of salvation or renewal in Christ crucified is accomplished by the Spirit of Christ, who inspires or influences his life of pure, crucified love, filled with suffering and joy, in his members who share in it by conquering all self-love and renouncing their own will. These souls desire nothing but the divine-human will of Christ, that is, his love, glory and singular goodness. This "spiration" of Christ's life is perfectly and supremely realized in his Mother, queen of heaven and earth, mediatrix of all grace, and model of all Christian holiness. She shares, in a singular

²⁷A summary of the doctrine of Ubertino of Casale may be found in my study: *In de schaduw van het Kruis. Een synthese van de christelijke volmaaktheid volgens de leer van Hubertinus van Casale*, Roermond 1952. Cf. also G.L. Potestà, *Storia ed escatologia in Ubertino da Casale*, Milan 1980; R. Rusconi, *La tradizione manoscritta delle opere degli Spirituali nelle biblioteche dei Predicatori e dei conventi dell'Osservanza*, in *Picenum Seraphicum* 12 (1975) 63-137. For Ubertino's influence on the spiritual life in the Netherlands, cf. Optatus, *De invloed van Hubertinus van Casale op het geestelijk leven in de Nederlanden*, in *Franciscanns Leven*, 30 (1947) 112-4; id., *De invloed van Hubertinus van Casale op het "Leven van Jesus" door Jan Brugman*, in *Ons Geest. Erf* 23 (1949) 316-34, 427-34. Cf. also *Ons Geest. Erf* 30 (1956) 291; 33 (1959) 166; 178 note 22; 35 (1961) 175, 183; 37 (1963) 180 note 1, 195, 332-37, 339-43; 45 (1970) 423-24. Cf. also: F.A.H. van den Hombergh, *Leven en Werk van Jan Brugman*, Groningen 1967, 79-103.

²⁸I have given the analytic proofs by citing the texts in my above-mentioned study.

manner, in the states and acts of her Son, in the service of his Mystical Body, the Church.

Ubertino wishes to describe the "Christic" and "Marian" life of union and transformation in the Spirit, without remaining silent about its radical and absolute demands on souls, especially the total abnegation in poverty, humility, and sacrifice of all egotistical self-love. Christ crucified cannot live in us as our all except on our own nothingness. Nor does Ubertino forget to warn his readers several times of two fatal dangers. The first is the error of wishing to leave behind union with Christ crucified for the sake of his divinity alone, since Christ as God-Man is the only way and life, and in his hypostatic union he is the one mediator between God and humans, the vital center of all creation. The second error is that of wishing to arrive at intimate union by means of false inactivity or passivity, forgetting that the unity of the contemplative and active life, after the example of Christ and his Mother, is always the one and only true mystical way.²⁹

Unfortunately this Franciscan spirituality has often been propounded in a way that is less than accessible to people. It has also been combined with some rather disputed questions, especially in the last book of the *Tree*. In spite of this, Ubertino's doctrine has found many readers throughout the Christian West for many centuries.³⁰ In particular, within reforming circles in the Order, the *Tree* was a profound source of spiritual renewal. I mention only the great Observants, and other reform movements, such as that of the first Capuchins.

²⁹For the fundamental aspects of his doctrine, the major references on the hypostatic union are: *Arbor*, Bk. I, ch. 6: *Iesus faber virgineus*, f. 7v; ch. 8: *Iesus emissus caelitus*, f. 15, 1; Bk. III, ch. 3: *Iesus desertum incolens*, f. 75v-77, 1; Bk. IV, ch. 7: *Iesus delecto stratus*, f. 154, 1-2 (John 17: participation in the hypostatic union in the Eucharist); ch. 35: *Iesus clarificatus*, f. 184v, 2; ch. 37: *Iesus cruce ditatus*, f. 191v, 1-2; the God-Man, center of all: *Prologus*, f. 2, 1; Bk. I, ch. 1: *Iesus ex patre genitus*, f. 5, 1; Bk. III, ch. 16: *Iesus die occupatus*, f. 123v, 1; Bk. I, ch. 9: *Iesus oleo dotatus*, f. 22v, 2; Bk. II, ch. 5: *Iesus redemptus parvulus*, f. 58v, 1-2; 60, 1; Bk. III, ch. 3: *Iesus desertum incolens*, f. 75, 1; ch. 17: *Iesus panem multiplicans*, f. 124, 2; Bk. IV, ch. 15: *Iesus matri compatiens*, f. 162, 2; ch. 37: *Iesus cruce ditatus*, f. 194v, 1; against "quietist" passivity and against flight from the "naked" divinity: Bk. III, ch. 22: *Iesus laxans reatus*, f. 134v, 1; Bk. IV, ch. 15: *Iesus matri compatiens*, f. 162, 1-2; ch. 29: *Iesus surgens beatus*, f. 178v, 1; ch. 36: *Iesus spirans afflatibus*, f. 185, 2; ch. 37: *Iesus cruce ditatus*, f. 191, 1.

³⁰For Spain, cfr. also: Melquiades Andrés, *La teología española en el siglo XVI*, Madrid 1976, 389 note 96 (on the Spanish translation ordered by Queen Isabella the Catholic); 410-12: "Ubertino is an influential author among the writers on the spiritual way of meditation: Osuna, Juan de los Angeles, Luis de San Juan Evangelista and other Franciscans" (389 note 96); cfr. II, 224; id., *Osuna*, in *DictSpir* XI (1982) 1047.

All that remains for us is to offer a few of the most typical texts. The first concerns the hypostatic union as the model of our supreme union with God in Christ, the God-Man:

In order to see when the soul is perfectly united to God, return to the basis of the union. Now in Christ is the fulfillment of all union. If you see how the personal union took place, you will see how the union of love must take place in you. In order for the humanity of Jesus to be united personally to the Son of God, that humanity could not in itself have been a *suppositum* or person. Only the divine nature exists *per se* in Jesus; the person of the Son of God became the *suppositum* and person of that humanity. This is what must take place in your soul: you must desire to attain the perfection of that cross of his, and so you must be united to God by a union of love and will. Through perfect self-denial let your love of self and others cease, together with all gratification and craving of your will. The humanity of Christ is neither a *suppositum* nor person, but it is rooted and inserted into the person of the Son of God in such a way that it is his person. In the same way, let your will and your love be absorbed by God's love and will through the inpouring of the Holy Spirit, so that the Holy Spirit is, as it were, your will and love; so that you desire nothing for yourself but only for Jesus, indeed that you desire nothing but him.³¹

The second text concerns the "spiration" of Christ in us by the Holy Spirit:

In the early Church the Holy Spirit was given in more visible signs at the preaching of the apostles and other disciples. In the same way the blessed Jesus unceasingly breathes the same Spirit in his members until the end of time, according to the measure with which, while he was alive, he bore those things in virtue of his love and suffering, and bears them in that blessed kingdom in the joy of his fruition. The entire inpouring of the Holy Spirit in us has but one purpose: that we might become what Christ made of us in himself. For we are nothing except in him. Therefore nothing in itself should or can decrease the breath of the Holy Spirit without offending the very Spirit who breathes.³²

Elsewhere, in the same sense:

Burning with love after receiving the "spiration," let the Spirit of Christ blow away everything that is not in conformity with Christ and always draw in that which is in conformity with Christ. Let it breathe within and recall his example; let it constantly breathe his disgrace or suffering. Living

³¹TL, Bk. IV, ch. 37: *Iesus cruce ditatus*, f. 191v, 1-2.

³²TL, Bk. IV, ch. 36: *Iesus spirans afflatibus*, f. 185, 2.

totally not his own life, but that of the beloved Jesus, he cries out with the Apostle: "For to me life is Christ... (Phil 1:21)" and "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."³³

This text of St. Paul (Gal 2:19-20) recurs at least a dozen times in the *Tree*. Christian life is simply a constant "spiration" of the life of Christ, the God-Man, crucified in souls by his Spirit. What we have in fact is this communication or circle of trinitarian love of which Christ is the vital and central mediator—the crucified Christ, of course, with his Mother as chief participant and all of us, together with the universe, as his Mystical Body.

The ideal example of the union of crucified and transforming love is the seraphic St. Francis, stigmatized by the fire of the Holy Spirit, an everlasting model of true gospel life:

Because the Holy Spirit himself is love, in order to initiate the state of him who is totally inflamed with seraphic love, you fittingly assumed the form of a seraph, from which flows all the ardor of the Holy Spirit, to be poured out forever upon human beings from the ardor of your cross and the wounds of your immeasurable love, and from nowhere else. So, amid the bright and fiery wings of the seraphic apparition, you showed by your crucifixion that that state of the Holy Spirit consists abundantly in this: that [those wings] neither are nor manifest externally anything that belongs to your perfect son except you, Jesus, crucified through the ardor of the Holy Spirit for the sake of all unworthy souls.³⁴

Since Christ had accepted the cross in his mother's womb, constantly carried it in his heart and formed it in his body with much austerity, he never said "It is finished" until, having shed all his blood, he left his torn and dead body fastened to the cross in pain. Nor do we read that he ever commended his spirit into the Father's hands except from the cross. So, those who think they can partake of anything divine, without being led in through the door of the most holy cross, are very much mistaken. Or if, when the soul is completely absorbed in the abyss of uncreated light, that it can forget for a while all created things, whether its own or those of others.

³³TL, BK. IV, ch. 29: *Iesus surgens beatus*, f. 178v, 1.

³⁴TL, Bk. V: *Iesus seraph alatus*, f. 220, 1. Cf. also: "Because the bride never ceases to love well, until she is configured to Christ Jesus by her entire manner of living, and her tongue cries out within her heart because of Jesus, and she breathes only Jesus, not living her own life, but that of the beloved Jesus. As a sign of this, Jesus, no longer subject to suffering, breathing on the apostles on the day of his resurrection, gave them the Spirit in his breath so that they might live, no longer their own, but the life of the Word, and might breathe by his breath" (TL, Bk. IV, ch. 15, *Iesus matri compatines*, fl. 162, 2).

Had that light been truly divine and not from the devil or deceiver, [the soul] would be so immersed in God that it would find itself sharing more deeply in the unfathomable sufferings of Christ's cross. I fear that many, saying they contemplate divine things, are taken off the cross by him who set his seat at the north wind and said that he was like the Most High....

Therefore I discontinue that devotion, because, just as the grace of union does not end in Christ, so it does not end in his sufferings, if we understand rightly. Nor in the virtues, but rather in the splendor of the divinity. And so, in this life, let no one dare to presume he has passed beyond the state of the cross or reached its due measure. No matter how much he advances, let him know that what he seeks always remains in it. Whoever says he has passed beyond it, either never really attains it, or else impiously abandons it because of his own blindness.³⁵

Only the Blessed Virgin was able to share perfectly in the states and acts of her crucified Son. We must follow her example, remaining with her on the cross of Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The stigmatized man of LaVerna goes before us.

Such a crucifixion can take place only through the inpouring of the Holy Spirit. That suffering is the work of the Holy Spirit in the soul.... A pure soul allows the Holy Spirit free rein within itself. Unresisting, it allows him to produce in it emanations of the virtues, without rebellion or negligence, by accepting his inpourings with its entire self.... Insofar as we are cleansed from vices, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit in the sufferings of the cross. The soul that draws closer to the summit of purity experiences the total transformation of Christ's sufferings. They are certainly mistaken who call the way of the cross "beginner's fervor" and say that they have been raised to higher consolations, discontinuing the difficult practice of virtue and extinguishing in themselves the in-pouring of the Holy Spirit. That crucifixion does not lack the supreme sweetness of divinity. Indeed, the greater your transformation into the suffering and sorrowful Christ, the more you are transformed into the sublime and glorious God, especially if you have purged yourself of your depraved love, so that you do not love the glories of the eternal God and virtue's reward for yourself. Nor do you turn back in self-love, but in the most perfect self-abnegation you taste only the divine glory that is of God and the virtues as emanations of the divine will—but only because he wills it and for no other reason.

And when the Savior himself says, "I will that where I am, there my servant be," to a soul that serves his will alone by self-abnegation, a twofold state of

³⁵TL, Bk. IV, ch. 15: *Iesus matri compatiens*, f. 162, 2.

likeness to him is given. For just as [the Savior] enjoyed the vision of God while on earth, in the same part of his soul that was both supremely blessed and suffering, so to a soul that is perfectly cleansed he sometimes communicates at the same time perfect transformation in his suffering and perfect enjoyment (I speak of enjoyment in this life) in his eternal splendor. And I think that perhaps many in this life have been drawn to this perfection so that they felt themselves transfixed in soul and body and immersed in sweetness of soul in the depths and ardor of Jesus' divinity of Jesus and the Father's bosom. I think this was truly fulfilled in blessed Francis after the seraphic apparition: the very apparition of the beloved Jesus, crucified in the form of a seraph, manifestly declared this. For he appeared both crucified and winged, pierced with wounds and afire with splendor, that by this apparition he might show that Francis was fastened to the cross in the flesh and transformed in soul into his unfathomable suffering, burning ardor, and seraphic experience; and that in his goodness he might so direct the wings of contemplation that true sons, meditating on him, might fulfill spiritually that which Francis, the first standard-bearer of the cross, imaged in bodily manner while in ecstasy.³⁶

IV. The First Capuchins

The christocentrism of the first Capuchins has been known for a long time, beginning with their Constitutions of 1536. Following the example of St. Francis more closely, not only according to the *Rule*, but also according to his *Testament*, his other writings and his own life, they strove to observe the evangelical *Rule* spiritually, that is, simply, purely and without gloss, inspired by the Spirit and life of the Lord in the Gospel, who spoke in St. Francis. This Spirit and life of Christ, followed by St. Francis and his first companions, was concretely expressed in the Constitutions as the spirit and life of the Capuchins. This Capuchin identity is described for the first time in their Constitutions of 1536. This spirit and life of Christ, taught and lived by Francis, meant for them in practice the spirit and life of the poor, humble, and crucified Christ, servant of the Father and human beings, concretely expressed in the spirit and life of prayer, poverty, and penance, generously realized in their fraternal life and apostolate among the poor.³⁷

³⁶TL, Bk. IV, ch. 15: *Iesus matri compatiens*, f. 162, 1. Thus the Blessed Virgin, as Mother of Christ, alone shares perfectly in the Holy Spirit (f. 162r-v).

³⁷Cf. Optat de Veghel, *La réforme des Frères Mineurs Capucins dans l'Ordre franciscain et dans l'Eglise*, in *CF* 35 (1965) 5-108; id., *De traditione orationis in Ordine nostro*, in *Anal. OFM Cap* 89 (1973) 63-65; id., *Significatio franciscana reformationis capuccinae genuinis fontibus spiritus et vitae S. Francisci consideratis*, *ibid.* 94 (1978) 336-59. See also the bibliography and notes in: *Le prime Costituzioni dei Frati Minori Cappuccini*, ed. F.A. Catalano - C. Cargnoni - G. Santarelli, Rome 1982, 83-91, 159-

They readily called this spirituality the life of the spirit and pure love. It was drawn from their daily affective meditation and conveyed to the people through their works of mercy, popular preaching, and writing.³⁸ The Franciscan sources for this spirit and life are found in the writings of St. Francis and the early legends, especially those from the Leonine tradition. Personally, they sought this Franciscan tradition in the book of *Conformities*, in the *Fioretti*, and in the *Chronicles* of the Order—but also in the spiritual works of St. Bonaventure (not just the *Major Legend*) and the great spiritual writers such as Ubertino of Casale.³⁹ Bérubé has recently shown that the Capuchins had expressly chosen St. Bonaventure as guide for their spiritual life and their popular preaching.⁴⁰

On the other hand, we know that the first Capuchins were deeply influenced by the so-called Nordic spirituality, especially that of Harphius, as well as by the Modern Devotion.⁴¹ Finally, Cargnoni has shown that the first and chief masters of the Capuchin reform—John of Fano, Bernardine of Asti, Bernardine Ochino of Siena, and Francis of Iesi—also depend directly and especially on the Observant Bartholomew Cordoni, whose book (in manuscript form), *Dialogue of the Union of God with the Soul*, Milan 1539, was a major influence.⁴² In this mystical work the Harphian tradition, even in its extreme interpretation by Margeurite Porete, meets the spiritual tradition of Ubertino of Casale.⁴³ Indeed, in the Milan edition we find

60 note 8. Finally cfr. C. Urbanelli, *Ancora sulla identità del Cappuccino*, in *L'Italia Francescana*, 56 (1981) 4-8.

³⁸Cf. C. Cargnoni, *L'apostolate dei Cappuccini come "redundantia di amore,"* in *L'Italia Francescana* 53 (1979) 569-93.

³⁹Cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 91 notes 24-5, 160 note 8.

⁴⁰Cf. C. Bérubé, *Les Capucins à l'école de Saint Bonaventure*, in *CF* 44 (1974) 275-330. His study, however, does not show this for the first Capuchins but rather for the later periods.

⁴¹Cf. Optat de Veghel, *La réforme*, 59-63; id., *La spiritualité franciscaine du 16^e au 18^e siècle*, in *Laur.* 21 (1980) 94-109; Etta Gullick and Optat de Veghel, *Herp*, in *DS* VII/1 (1969) 351-66.

⁴²Cf. C. Cargnoni, *Fonti, tendenze e sviluppi della letteratura spirituale cappuccina primitiva*, in *CF* 48 (1978) 311-98; id., *Figura eminens Bernardini de Asti, praecipui reformationis cappuccinae promotoris*, in *Anal. OFM Cap* 94 (1978) 374-84 (the prayers of Bernardine of Asti).

⁴³Cargnoni, *L'apostolato*, 576. We know that this doctrine depends to a large extent on Harphius, but also and directly on Marguerite Porete, a Beguine and the author of the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, condemned to death by the Inquisition in 1310. This book contains an extreme mysticism, barely orthodox and acceptable, although it is explained by the doctrine of Harphius, who expresses himself more cautiously. Cf. Cargnoni, *Fonti*, 335-64. Cordoni also depends to a large extent and directly on the *Tree* of Ubertino of Casale. Cf. N. Santinelli, *Il beato Bartolomeo Cordoni e le fonti*

inserted a Chapter 53 entitled *The Circle of Divine Love*, whose author is Francis of Iesi. In this *Circle*, which is a summary of Cordoni's book, the author speaks of a method of prayer and life that is clearly trinitarian and christocentric, which to a great extent formed the first Capuchins, especially the authors of the first Constitutions, namely, the above-mentioned Observants-Capuchins: John of Fano, Bernardine of Asti, Bernardine Ochino, and Francis of Iesi.⁴⁴

Through this mysticism we can now know the deepest inspiration of our first Constitutions and our primitive Capuchin spirituality. The content, insofar as it refers to Francis, imitator of Christ crucified, God and Man—which is our topic here—is as follows. Cordoni conceives the entire spiritual life as a life of unitive love, inspired by pure love, and in direct union with the crucified and eucharistic Christ. But this christocentric life is lived in close union with the Trinity. The soul, united to the Trinity, becomes one will, one spirit, one love and heart, one “God,” desiring only to live and to do what the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, inspires it. At the summit is a seraphic life that corresponds to the Franciscan Rule. It is a state of perfect love in a life that has been “annihilated,” according to the rule of divine love: to give all and ask or desire nothing for oneself. This means complete openness to the Spirit of the Lord:

How happy is that soul, which has in it the Spirit of the Lord and these holy activities, to breathe this Spirit of the Lord. This operation surpasses every activity of creatures and human knowledge. St. Francis, filled with this Spirit, knowing that it is worth more than all the treasures and knowledge of the world, said to his brothers and wrote in the Rule: “Let those who are illiterate not be anxious to learn, but let them pay attention to what they must desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and its holy activity.”⁴⁵

Such souls, inspired by this Spirit, love solely and purely for love of God. They are ready to undertake great things for God, even martyrdom, giving their life for their enemies. They feel themselves so closely united with God in a holy spiritual marriage that they “breathe” the Spirit of

della sua mistica, Città di Castello, 1930, 26-7, 58-9, 64-73, 89-96.

⁴⁴We find Francis of Iesi's doctrine on the circle of love very close to that of St. Bonaventure and Ubertino of Casale; cf. above. We know that this doctrine also influenced the mysticism of Ruusbroec and the Beguines, probably through the two Franciscans in question, Bonaventure and Ubertino. The doctrine on the celebration of Mass in mystical union with Christ and with all of creation is found in the *Tree*, Bk. IV, ch. 5, f. 142-45.

⁴⁵Cargnoni, *L'Apostolato*, 580.

Christ, desiring that he live in everyone and joining him in a perpetual Mass to adore and love the Father, with all and for all, that he may be all in all.

This "spiration" of Christ in the Spirit, as in a circle of trinitarian love, is specifically explained in Francis of Iesi's *Circle of Divine Love*. Christ is the vital center, the crucified God-Man who desires to form all human beings and all creation into Christ in his Spirit. He does this by communicating to them and giving them a share in his pure love for the Father and for us, in order to celebrate the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, now and forever: *I thirst*. This is the fire he wishes to bring to the earth and heaven. Mystical souls, united to Christ in this "spiration" of love, become one spirit and one will with him. They breathe his divine-human love in the same Spirit.⁴⁶ Cargnoni gives a general description:

The soul desires that Christ be loved by the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, by his spouse the Church, triumphant, militant, and suffering, and by all creatures, burning with love that all may love and grow in this love. The entire universe, visible and invisible, resonates in the contemplative, with many and enduring sighs of love, with prayers or ejaculations and passionate desires and acts of love. Love for the trinitarian and cruciform Christ is repeated in the Church and in the contemplative as an incessant act, a spiral of love, through which the contemplative is Christ on the cross. Everything becomes Love.⁴⁷

The author adds:

In this trinitarian christocentrism of Francis of Iesi we see the influence of St. Bonaventure, Ubertino of Casale, and Cordoni. Christ is at the center, the cross, the Church: the central points of the contemplative experience of the first Capuchins, whose reform is described by Francis of Iesi as the "reform of the Friars Minor in the most perfect likeness of Christ."⁴⁸

For the first Capuchins, also, St. Francis is the privileged example of reform in the likeness of Christ. First of all by his stigmatized life, but also by his Rule, explained fundamentally by the Spirit of Christ who speaks in him. Chapter X of the *Later Rule* says that the brothers should desire above all else to have the Spirit of the Lord and its holy activity. Here these Capuchins discovered their mystical experience of Christ, inspired in their

⁴⁶Ibid., 580-91.

⁴⁷Ibid., 584.

⁴⁸Ibid., 584.

souls by the Spirit, in their life of prayer and conformity to the crucified Christ in persecution, suffering, infirmity, and love of enemies.

This "circle of divine love" was taught by Francis of Iesi to his confreres, especially during their two years of forced retreat into contemplative solitude after the fall of Ochino and his flight to Geneva. No doubt Ochino, before and after that time, was himself the most convinced and most profound transmitter of this among his brothers and among the people in his sermons and books. He never ceased to speak about this life of the Spirit in us, which conforms us to the crucified Christ who is our hope, our glory, and our faith. It is to him especially that we owe the profound Pauline doctrine of Christ that we are to preach to the people after Christ has taken possession of our hearts by his Spirit, "the excess of love."⁴⁹

Cargnoni does not hesitate to conclude that we owe the spiritual richness of our Constitutions of 1536, which was existential or *based on real life*, to the mystical experience of John of Fano, Bernardine of Asti, Bernardino Ochino, Francis of Iesi, and their confreres. Their insistence on Christ crucified, on pure and naked love, on transforming union, resounds with echoes of Ochino and reproduces the mystical breath of John of Fano's *Art of Union with God* and Francis of Iesi's *Circle*. Because of this experience, the Constitutions say that preaching should flow more from contemplative prayer than from the study of letters, since in prayer we read the Book of Life, Christ crucified (n. 78). Indeed, the light of mysticism shines in the life, legislation, and writings of the first Capuchins:

The Capuchin temperament is mystical. From there flow the variety of works, whether external activity or their writings, since it was always the mystical ideal that drew them outside the friary and inspired their entire apostolate: in the pulpit, in the missions, in plague-stricken cities, in humble country dwellings.⁵⁰

We conclude with some typical texts taken from our first Constitutions. They express the primacy of the Spirit and pure love in following Christ, the God-Man.⁵¹

To the end that our Congregation, as the vineyard of the most high Son of God, may stand fast in the spiritual observance of the evangelical and

⁴⁹Cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 194 n. [76] in the critical edition; cf. 63, 112. Cf. C. Cargnoni, *Ochino*, in *DS XI* (1982) 576-90.

⁵⁰Cargnoni, *L'Apostolato*, 592.

⁵¹All citations are from the text of the critical edition: *Le prime Costituzioni*, 170-204.

seraphic Rule, our general chapter...has deemed it advisable to draw up certain statutes...to protect us against whatever might injure the living Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ and against all relaxations opposed to the fervent and seraphic zeal bequeathed to us by our father St. Francis, which are as follows (Prologue).⁵²

And because it was the desire, not only of our father St. Francis, but also of Christ our Redeemer, that the Rule should be observed simply, to the letter and without gloss, as it was observed by our first seraphic fathers, and because our rule is very clear, in order that it be observed purely, holily, and spiritually, we renounce all privileges and explanations that relax it, detract from its pure observance, and wrest it from the pious, just, and holy intentions (*mente*) of Christ our Lord, who spoke in St. Francis.... (n. 4, 171).

Along with the papal declarations, they accept the Testament, life, doctrine, and example of St. Francis and his companions as the first spiritual commentary on the Rule (n. 4-5, 171f).⁵³

Again, on life according to the spirit they write:

The better to acquire the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, let both lectors and students strive to deepen the spiritual life even more than to cultivate letters. By striving more for this spirit than for the letter, they will derive more profit from their studies. For without the spirit the true sense is not attained, but the mere letter which blinds and kills (n. 81, 196f).

By striving to study in poverty and humility, they will be "counted worthy to be introduced to the true and pleasing knowledge of Sacred Scripture, under whose meaning lies hidden him whose Spirit is sweeter than honey to those who taste it" (n. 81, 197). These beautiful words, which recall especially the doctrine of Ochino, were later dropped.⁵⁴

The primacy of the spirit and the life of prayer is strongly emphasized:

⁵²Cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 170. On "spiritual" observance in the reform tradition of the Order, 83 note 1; 85 note 5 for the expression "spirit of Christ." It is John of Fano especially who says that we must have the Spirit of Christ if we are to understand the law of the letter of the evangelical Rule.

⁵³Cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 88-90, notes 18-21.

⁵⁴Cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 149 note 24; 150 note 27. It seems they were eliminated to avoid the danger of "Protestantism."

Since holy prayer is the best mistress of the friars, in order that the spirit of devotion may not decrease in the friars, but, continually burning on the altar of our heart, may be kindled more and more, as our Seraphic Father wished, we ordain that, although the true spiritual Friar Minor should always pray, two special hours shall be appointed for the tepid.... Let the friars remember that prayer is nothing else than speaking to God with the heart. Consequently, he does not truly pray who speaks to God only with the lips. Each one, therefore, should endeavor to pray mentally, and according to the teaching of Christ, our best master, adore the Father in spirit and in truth, taking diligent care to enlighten the mind and enkindle the affections far more than to frame words.⁵⁵

⁵⁵N. 25, 178f. Note the positive manner in which Chapter V of the Rule is explained, as well as the practical application for observing at least two hours of daily prayer, according to the "signs of the times." The introduction of a meditation period as part of the conventual schedule had become an exercise typical of the movement of modern devotion and observance throughout the Church. The new Orders at the beginning of the sixteenth century accepted it as crucial for personal and collective renewal of Christian life. Cf. my study: *De traditione vitae orationis in Ordine nostro*, in *Anal. OFM Cap 89* (1973) 63-7; I. Brady, *The History of Mental Prayer in the Order of Friars Minor*, in *Franciscan Studies* 11 (1951) 317-45; P. Philippe, *L'oraison dominicaine au XIII siècle*, in *La Vie Spirituelle Supplément* 3 (1948) 424-54; J. Hofer, *Johannes von Capestrano*, Innsbruck 1936, 89-91, 149, 213, 347, 518-21; Optatus van Asseldonk, *De oefening van het inwendig gebed in de Minderbroedersorde gedurende de viiiftiende en de zestiende eeuw*, in *Ons Geest. Erf* (1948) 113-60; C.M. Catena, *La meditazione in comune nell'Ordine Carmelitano: origine e sviluppo*, in *Carmelus* 2 (1955) 315-50; I. Iparraguirre, *La oración en la Compañía naciente*, in *Arch. Hist. S.J.* 25 (1956) 455-87; A.M. Albareda, *Intorno alla scuola di orazione metodica stabilita a Monserrata dall'Abate García Jiménez de Cisneros (1493-1510)*, in *ibid.* 25 (1956) 254-316; Melquiades Andrés, *La teología española en el siglo XVI*, I, Madrid 1976, 391-404; II, 1977, 184-94, 562-69; J.A. Jungmann, *Christliches Beten in Wandel und Bestand*, Munich 1969; O. Steggink, *Dialog und Gebet. Anthropologische und theologische Hintergründe der Gruppenmeditation*, in *Carmelus* 22 (1975) 52-82; J.M. van der Lans, *Religieuze ervaring en meditatie. Een godsdienstpsychologische studie*, Deventer 1980, 108-30. For the immediate context of the Constitutions, cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 106 note 19; 108 note 20. For the primitive tradition of the Order, cf. *Dicta Beati Aegidii Assisiensis*, Ad Claras Aquas 1905, app. II, p. 113; Leo, *Vita Beati Aegidii Assisiatis*, in *Scripta fratris Leonis*, ed. Lemmens, in *Documenta Antiqua Franciscana* I, Ad Claras Aquas, 1901, 65. Thomas of Eccleston, *De adventu fratrum minorum in Angliam*, coll. XV, in *AF* I, Ad Claras Aquas, 1885, 255; ed. A.G. Little, Paris 1909, 125. Cf. also: N. Mattioli, *Il B. Simone Fidati da Cascia*, Rome 1898, 476-79 (Breviloquium of Angelo Clareno). The crucial importance of prayer in the Order seems to justify this bibliography. Finally, we note the opinion of L. Cristiani, *L'Eglise à l'époque du Concile de Trente*, in A. Fliche and V. Martin, *Histoire de l'Eglise* XVII, Paris 1948, 253-54. Speaking of the practice of methodical prayer, he writes: "When all is said and done, the reform of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century must certainly be attributed to this practice."

This spirit of prayer must be preserved during work by means of a pure intention:

Let the friars take heed not to make work their sole object, nor to set their affections upon it, nor to become so engrossed in it as to extinguish, diminish, or weaken the spirit to which all things should be subservient. With their eyes fixed always on God, let them take the best and shortest road, so that labor imposed (*dato*) on human beings by God, accepted and commended by the saints as a means of preserving interior recollection, may not become an occasion of distraction and laxity (n. 41, 184).

We see that the Constitutions consider work as something truly positive, as a gift or grace from God, according to the *Rule*, meant to serve interior recollection.⁵⁶ This interior recollection, this life of the spirit, is identified with the way of pure love, which is the best and shortest way, the goal of everything, to which the rest must be subservient or subject. In short, it is the end of life:

Remembering that our final end is God, to whom each of us ought to tend and aspire, and into whom we should strive to be transformed, we exhort all the friars to direct their every thought to that end and to turn to it, with every possible yearning of love, all their intentions and desires. Thus with our whole heart, mind and soul, power and strength, with actual, continuous, intense, and pure love, we may unite ourselves to our supremely good Father.⁵⁷

In order to constantly “purify” this life of pure love, we must strive to harmonize the contemplative and active life, in the mixed life, whose criterion is life according to the spirit:

And while preaching to others, should they feel the spirit weakening, let them return to solitude. There let them remain, till once again, full of God, the impulse of the Holy Spirit may move them to go forth to spread divine grace over the world. Thus engaged, now like Martha, now like Mary, they shall follow Christ in his mixed life, who, after praying on the mountain, went down to the temple to preach, nay, descended from heaven to earth to save souls.⁵⁸

⁵⁶The translation of “*dato*” by “imposed” seems inaccurate and contrary to the context; cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 123f notes 3-4.

⁵⁷N. 39, 183. On the life of pure love, spiritual devotion, and life in the spirit, cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 112f notes 1-2.

⁵⁸N. 77, 194; cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 144, note 6.

History proves that the Capuchins always insisted on this as the central point of their doctrine and life.

This pure love calls for true disciples of Christ, who, “united in the sweet name of Jesus” and one in heart and soul, strive always “to exercise themselves in divine love and fraternal charity” (n. 94, 200; see the entire text). In n. 28 (180) they speak of loving obedience after the example of Christ, striving to obey and serve one another in the Spirit, as brothers in Christ. It is the privilege of God’s children who possess the spirit of children to live “for the love of God and for his pleasure,” as did the Son for the Father (nn. 102-103, 202f), and not, like slaves, avoid sin in order to escape punishment (cf. n. 102, 202). By acting in this way, with cheerfulness and simplicity of heart, we follow Christ who is our All (cf. 103-105, 203f).

In the trinitarian Christ, “God and Man” and Son of the Father, to whom “the Holy Spirit has given testimony,” in whom is

all our merit, example..., meditation, and imitation, in whom all things are sweet, learned, holy, and perfect..., who is the end of the law, the salvation of God, our hope, our wisdom and justice, our sanctification and redemption, to him who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, co-eternal, consubstantial, and co-equal lives and reigns one God, be everlasting praise, honor, glory, and majesty. Amen.⁵⁹

⁵⁹N. 105, 204. For the sources of this christocentric text, cf. *Le prime Costituzioni*, 165f note 22. We are reminded especially of Ochino.