

## Francis of Assisi and the Prisms of Theologizing

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A Medieval adage states: *Theologia Deum docet, a Deo docetur, ad Deum ducit* [Theology teaches of God, is taught by God, and leads to God]. From the medieval perspective, Francis of Assisi clearly enters history as a theologian, one who, in the words of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "pursues in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living tradition of the church."<sup>1</sup> While all agree with Alexander Gerken that Francis was no "professional theologian" as much as "a saint of practical Christianity," we must accept that his biblical insights initiated a school of theology that has enriched the Christian tradition since its inception.<sup>2</sup> Although no scholar, Francis's writings reveal a current of thought that influenced his followers for centuries. Even while Francis lived, the first pages of a theology inspired by his vision were being written and taught. He and his brothers traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East proclaiming the Gospel, settled in two centers of learning, Paris and Oxford, and encouraged theologians such as Anthony of Padua in Bologna. Curiously historians and biographers frequently view this development as a betrayal of Francis's simple view of God, the world, and the human person. In varying degrees, the refrain attributed to Giles of Assisi — "Paris, Paris, why do you destroy the Order of Saint Francis?" — has echoed throughout the centuries.

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<sup>1</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 20:8 (July 5, 1990) 119.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Gerken, "The Theological Intuition of St. Francis of Assisi," *Greyfriars Review* 7:1 (1993) 71-94.

To write of Francis as a theologian, however, presents us living at this time a fundamental question. In its statement, "Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstanding Between Bishops and Theologians," the United States Bishops used the term theologian to designate "the Catholic who seeks to mediate, through the discipline of scholarship, between a living faith and the culture it is called to transform."<sup>3</sup> By accenting the role of "the discipline of scholarship," the bishops anticipated what the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith underscored in its study of the ecclesial vocation of the theologian. "Through the course of centuries," the Congregation states, "theology has progressively developed into a true and proper science. The theologian must, therefore, be attentive to the epistemological requirements of his discipline, to the demands of rigorous critical standards and thus to a rational verification of each stage of his research." In light of such statements, how can we apply the title "theologian" to one who described himself as *ignorans et idiota* and whose relatively few writings suggest corrections and refinements made at later dates by those who may well have been embarrassed by their saintly founder's lack of learning?

The challenge of portraying Francis as a theologian becomes more daunting, however, because of what Bernard Lambert calls *les deux démarches*, the two ways, of approaching God.<sup>4</sup> Are we speaking of God — theology as such? Or are we speaking of ourselves in God's presence — anthropology in a more technical sense? These questions become more complex when we consider, as does John J. Mueller, the components or tools of theology which inevitably influence the methodology we use.<sup>5</sup> How do we encounter God? Does the world really matter? Do our experiences count? Will we find God in suffering? Such questions have prompted a variety of methods with which contemporary theologians have endeavored to understand the divine mysteries. There is no longer one systematic theology such as the scholastic philosophical approach that shaped our thought for nearly eight centuries. The metaphysical approach that gained acceptance in the thirteenth century — and

<sup>3</sup>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstanding Between Bishops and Theologians," *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 19:7 (June 29, 1989) 101.

<sup>4</sup>Bernard Lambert, "Les deux démarches de la théologie," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 89 (1967) 257-280.

<sup>5</sup>John J. Mueller, *What Are They Saying about Theological Method?* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984).

against which Francis seems to have reacted — has given way to those which are existential, linguistic, eschatological, as well as highly historical.

While some see this phenomenon as obscuring the clear, systematic articulation of the truth, others maintain that this development empowers us to see as never before the enormous riches of our Christian faith. In *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of the Church*, for example, Avery Dulles underscores the contribution of the Second Vatican Council in its "recovery of tradition."<sup>6</sup> The Council, Dulles maintains, re-awakened our sensitivity to the varieties of theological perspectives that have shaped the doctrinal heritage of the Church. The International Theological Commission established by Pope Paul VI, meanwhile, acknowledged in 1973 this pluralism of theologies and, although concerned about the dangers of confusion and disagreement, accepted the possible richness that it would bring.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Franciscans throughout the world have begun to inquire more profoundly about their own theological tradition. Hermann-Josef Lauter, Giovanni Iammerrone and Alejandro Villalmonste, each representing different families of the First Order, have drawn the attention of their confreres to the uniqueness of the Franciscan theological tradition and highlighted its contributions.<sup>8</sup>

Surprisingly, we may examine contemporary theological trends and discover that they resonate with many of the currents of Francis's insights. This is clearly the case in our investigation of the contextual theologies that begin with the strident cry of the poor and oppressed, and ultimately reflect upon the meaning of Christ and His message of salvation as well as the role of the Christian community in mediating His presence. It is true when we scrutinize more empirical theologies in which the relationships involved in experience receive particular attention, and in which culture is accepted as possessing its own dynamism that presents concepts and values in different forms and through a variety of symbols. Contemporary Franciscans find themselves

<sup>6</sup>Avery Dulles, "Vatican II and the Recovery of Tradition," *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 75-92.

<sup>7</sup>International Theological Commission, "Unity of the Faith and Theological Practice," *The Tablet* 227 (1973) 645-647.

<sup>8</sup>Hermann-Josef Lauter, "Franziskanische Theologie für unsere Zeit," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 33 (1970) 1-5; Giovanni Iammerrone, "Possibilità, senso e compiti di una 'teologia francescana' in se e per il momento attuale," *Miscellanea Franciscana* 78 (1978) 339-56; "Franciscan Theology Today: Its Possibility, Necessity And Value," *Greyfriars Review* 8:1 (1994); Alejandro Villalmonste, "Es que necesitamos una teología franciscana?" *Estudios Franciscanos* 87 (1986) 683-718.



comfortable approaching the mysteries of faith from both perspectives, as well as from those that are more anthropological or transcendental.

Much has been written concerning Francis's theological insights. Hermann-Josef Lauter, for example, finds at the core of Francis's theology his piety and his Christian experience, that is, what he discovered in the humble and condescending love of God in creation in Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> While acknowledging the importance of identifying these Gospel insights, Giovanni Iammerrone accentuates Francis's reflection on the historical, cultural, and ecclesial contexts in which he struggled to live the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> He laments that "theology done by Franciscan scholars is not sufficiently attuned to Francis's form of life, especially to minority," and questions an approach that remains historical in nature and narrow in scope. "In our time, when theology is acquiring truly universal and ecumenical dimensions," he argues, "we have to wonder what sense it would make to develop a Franciscan theology nurtured on the great Mediterranean-Western tradition of Franciscan theology."<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly Francis's writings present us with theological insights that speak of his optimism, hope, and belief. But by reflecting on the theology of Francis are we involved in a historical exercise or in an endeavor that will highlight his approaches to the mystery of God, approaches that will be valid and fruitful for us? Does Francis, in other words, offer us a theology as much as a way of theologizing?

There are many vantage points we might assume in this enterprise. Francis's biographers offer us so many images through which we might enter into the drama of his encounters with God. Yet three pivotal, ever-deepening qualities of his life suggest starting-points from which we may begin to articulate what might be regarded as his theological method: penance, poverty, and prayer. Each was a virtue which Francis vigorously encouraged; at the same time, each became so much a part of his life that we could easily investigate his personality through each one. What is most important, however, is that Francis understood God, the world and its inhabitants, and his own sufferings and joys through these prisms. As one who was continually wrestling with his sinfulness, Francis discovered a Supreme Being who personified tenderness and forgiveness and, in that discovery, recognized a com-

<sup>9</sup>Hermann-Josef. Lauter, "Franziskanische Theologie für unsere Zeit," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 33 (1970) 1-5.

<sup>10</sup>Giovanni Iammerrone, "Franciscan Theology Today: Its Possibility, Necessity and Value," *Greyfriars Review* 8:1 (1994) 103-126.

<sup>11</sup>Iammerrone, 104.

mon bond with his fellow human beings, even the most wretched of them, the lepers. The poor man, however, came to know the God Who is overwhelmingly good, bountiful, and generous, and to discover that, even in his suffering and want, he shared with all of God's creatures a kinship. Such persistent self-emptying, moreover, filled Francis not only with a spirit of total dependence on God, it also prompted him to look upon everything differently. His prayer became that of a poor man begging from his benefactor; it also became that of the poet who finds meaning and beauty in everything.

### The Penitent

At the very heart of Francis's approach to life is his recognition of a call to penance. As he was dying, Francis himself had suggested in his *Testament* that he understood his spiritual life as one of metanoia: "The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance."<sup>12</sup> It is a continual refrain throughout his writings to his brothers, to the Poor Ladies, to the rulers of the peoples, and to all peoples. In both his *Earlier* and *Later Exhortations to the Faithful*, for example, he invites men and women to follow the prompting of the Spirit and does so by contrasting those who have or have not embraced a life of penance.<sup>13</sup> Those who embrace such a life enter loving relationships with the Triune God, see their world as expressions of the Creator's goodness, and live an eschatological reality. Those who do not become prisoners of evil, use the world for their own selfish, blind interests, and are bound up in the trappings of death.

We need only read the various accounts of Francis's first followers to appreciate the success of this invitation. When asked, for example, what Francis said to Clare during those secret meetings before she dramatically entered religious life, her companion, Bona of Guelfuccio, stated: "He always preached to her about converting to Jesus Christ."<sup>14</sup> In her own *Testament* Clare describes how foundational was this teaching. "After the most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart," she writes, "that I should do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis, a short while after his conversion, I, together with

<sup>12</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Testament* 1-3. All translations are taken from *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, edited and translated by Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Earlier Exhortation*.

<sup>14</sup> *Acts of the Process of Canonization XVII 3, Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, Revised and Expanded, translated and edited by Regis J. Armstrong (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1994) 182.

a few sisters whom the Lord had given me after my conversion, willingly promised him obedience."<sup>15</sup> Even Giles, one of Francis's first companions, defines the whole Franciscan way of life in terms of penance. "If we did not have the example of the fathers who went before us, perhaps we would not be in the state of penance in which we now are."<sup>16</sup>

In his *First Life of Saint Francis*, Thomas of Celano used what was then the traditional Augustinian approach to characterize Francis's life: the more one embraced a life of conversion, the more powerful became a life of virtue. Paragraph after paragraph describes the slow but deliberate struggle of the young Francis as he turned ever more fully to his Creator. Thomas's vocabulary, however, seems to be that of monasticism rather than that of Francis. Sophronius Clasen interprets the *First Life* through the monastic understanding of religious life as "angelic," that is, of a conscious effort of conversion from sinfulness to embody that purity and single-mindedness with which the angels worship their Creator.<sup>17</sup> François DeBeer, meanwhile, regards both of Thomas's portraits through the prism of conversion and, in his *La Conversion de Saint François*, suggested that this was the way of Franciscan asceticism.<sup>18</sup> From either perspective, penance became the central theme that Thomas used to delineate Francis's journey of faith. In all the early documents of the Franciscan movement, moreover, the conversion to penance appears as prerequisite of the Franciscan way of life.

While the biblical concept of metanoia undoubtedly expresses the very essence of the profound re-orientation of Francis's whole being and conduct to God, by reflecting upon his initial conversion Francis understood the radical shift in his apprehension and values as a radical change in himself, in his relations with others, and, ultimately, with God. The *Testament*, however, is pivotal for our understanding of penance in the mind of Francis, for in its opening lines he expresses his awakening to penance not only in words that are reminiscent of Ezekiel's reflection on his prophetic call, the theme of the bitter and sweet, an echo of which we find in the *Book of Revelation*, but, as he

<sup>15</sup> Clare of Assisi, *Testament* 24-25. All translation of the writings of Saint Clare are taken from *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, Revised and Expanded, translated and edited by Regis J. Armstrong (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Giles of Assisi, *Golden Words: The Sayings of Brother Giles of Assisi*, with a biography of Nello Vian, translated by Ivo O'Sullivan (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> Sophronius Clasen, "Vom Franziskus der Legenda zum Franziskus der Geschichte," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 29 (1966) 15-29.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. François deBeer, *La Conversion de Saint François selon Thomas de Celano* (Paris: Éditions Franciscaines, 1974).



describes his providential meeting of a leper, Francis also taps into the Old Testament language of God's *misericordia*, a word we too easily translate as "mercy" but which had rich, deeper meanings. The Old and New Testaments express two thrusts: one which stresses the disposition to seek to relieve another's distress, the other which takes into account the place, source, and depth of the feeling which inclines to an act of piety. The English translation, "mercy," does not capture the richness of the biblical word. The Latin word may be more profitably translated as possessing or expression "a heart sensitive to misery."<sup>19</sup> Reflection on the encounter with the leper is, therefore, pivotal since Francis describes his beginning of conversion in just these terms.

"When I was in sin," he writes, "it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers."<sup>20</sup> However we wish to translate *amarum*, the word conveys the disgust Francis felt in even gazing upon lepers, those outcasts of society who epitomized the effects of sin.<sup>21</sup> But what is significant is his recognition, albeit in his later years, that the identification of his feelings was an important barometer of his spiritual well-being. In light of his natural repulsion, finding himself face-to-face with a leper was an act of God's grace which demanded a response. "The Lord Himself led me among them," Francis continues, "and I showed a heart sensitive to misery to them."<sup>22</sup> In that very encounter, in other words, there was not only a recognition of God's presence but a further acknowledgment of the divine being as *Misericordia*, "a heart sensitive to misery." The sinful, leprous Francis had experienced God's unconditional largesse. It immediately became the pattern of his life: the way to experience and to express God's presence. "When I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body." The images echo those of Ezechiel and John, both of whom describe their callings in terms of accepting what is bitter and sweet.<sup>23</sup>

This language of conversion is reminiscent of the method elaborated by Bernard Lonergan. "As conversion is basic to Christian living," Lonergan maintains, "so an objectification of conversion provides theology with its

<sup>19</sup> Further insights can be found in Jules Cambier and Xavier Léon-Dufour, "Mercy," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Xavier Léon-Dufour, (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1967) 309-312.

<sup>20</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Testament 1*

<sup>21</sup> In order to appreciate this material more fully, it is worthwhile reading Robert Ian Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviation in Western Europe 950-1250* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> *Testament 2*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ezechiel 9; *Revelations*

foundations."<sup>24</sup> What is said of Lonergan's concept of conversion might well be said of Francis's: it is the center of his theology. Francis's *Testament* shows us how clearly he reflected upon his experience of that one leper and understood it to be a decisive turning point in his life. That act of overcoming his revulsion and expressing to the leper what he himself had undoubtedly felt, the sensitivity of God to his misery, led Francis to adopt a similar manner of acting. As he lay dying, however, Francis made his inner affectivity outwardly visible, audible, palpable. By doing so, he unwittingly provides in his reflection what Lonergan considers the four levels of knowledge and, hence, of conversion: affective (experience), intellectual (understanding), moral (judging), and religious (deciding).

If we see Gospel life as an ongoing call to conversion, as Francis clearly does, dynamically lived and always developing, then we must recognize it as the very foundation of theologizing. To be authentic, theology must be grounded in the extremely personal struggle for and reflection upon the Gospel and, above all, the basis process of conversion to which it calls us. This foundation provides the starting point for a theology that necessarily operates within the circle of faith and inspires consequent reflection upon the "gracious self-communication of God," the gift of grace.

Yet we should not overlook that the conversion described by Francis is integrally tied up with identification with the outcasts, the emarginated, and despised of society. Embracing life's "lepers," Francis maintains, is a privileged way of opening ourselves to an experience of God and is, therefore, an initial step enabling us to be in touch with our sinfulness and, hence, the divine sensitivity to our misery. That single moment, however, inspired Francis to encourage his followers to look upon their lives among the oppressed, suffering and forgotten as gifts. They are instruments opening us to God. "They must rejoice," Francis teaches in the ninth chapter of his *Earlier Rule*, "when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside."<sup>25</sup>

Bonaventure recognizes this same pattern and offers it as part of the developmental process for those who would follow Francis. In his *Legenda major*, the Seraphic Doctor describes Francis's encounters with a simple beggar, a poor knight, and an abhorrent leper. Each encounter, Bonaventure

<sup>24</sup>Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) 130.

<sup>25</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Earlier Rule* IX 2.



suggests, evoked more of the young man's generosity, calling him from a simply natural response to one that was profoundly spiritual. Bonaventure places such deeds under the heading of *pietas*, that rich Roman virtue encompassing acts of devotion to God and compassion for another human being, especially one in need. *Si vultis essere veri scholares, oportet habere pietatem*, Bonaventure teaches in the *Third Collation on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, if you wish to be true scholars you must possess piety.<sup>26</sup> In this, he accentuates a foundation for the Franciscan approach to theology so aptly captured in the phrase: *pietas et doctrina*.

The embrace of penance, then, is the beginning not only of a spirit-filled life; it also forms the very principle of theology in that it impels us ever more to the very heart of God. Yet the depths of that infinitely sensitive, gracious God become clear as we confront the leprosy of sin, the arrogance of self-centeredness, and the fictions of a narrow vision.

### The Poor One

While a conversion to ongoing penance provides a perspective for theologizing that is concrete, personal, communal, and dynamic, the genius of Francis lies in his linking of conversion with poverty.<sup>27</sup> In our attempts to reflect upon the theological tradition he inspired, we cannot overlook that poverty, perhaps more than conversion, became the prism through which Francis reflected upon the mystery of God. In fact, poverty became the unique manner of approaching a life of penance: stripped of all material possessions, we are able to plummet the depths of sinfulness and to come before the Creator conscious of our dependency.

This is evermore the case when we consider the bond that Francis perceived between our tendency to appropriate and our sinfulness. Nothing shows the clarity of this more than his *Second Admonition*:

The Lord said to Adam: *Eat of every tree; you may not eat, however, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (cf. Gen 2:16,17).

He was able to eat of every tree of paradise because, as long as he did not go against obedience, he did not sin. For that person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good who makes his will his own and, in this way, exalts himself

<sup>26</sup>Bonaventure, *Collatio III De Donis Spiritus Sanctus* 17, *Opera Omnia* V (Ad Claras Aquas [Quaracchi]: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1941) 473.

<sup>27</sup>A thorough treatment of Franciscan poverty can be found in *A Poor Man's Legacy: An Anthology of Franciscan Poverty*, edited by Cyprian J. Lynch (St. Bonaventure, N.Y: Franciscan Pathways, 1988).

over the good things the Lord says and does in him. And so, through the suggestion of the devil and the transgression of the command, it became the fruit of the knowledge of evil. Therefore it is fitting that he suffer the punishment.

At the very heart of the Fall, Francis perceives a desire to appropriate. While other commentators describe the sin as essentially one of disobedience, Francis portrays it as an act of appropriation of the gift of liberty and as an exaltation of one's self over the goodness that continues to surround us. He presents the disturbing portrait of someone who takes what is not his, claims it as his own, and uses it for his own personal advancement. Thus we read of two movements in his description of sin: one which is grasping, appropriating, or grabbing; the other which is self-exalting, self-aggrandizing, or self-elevating. In other words, our sinful actions are basically centered on ourselves, on taking things for our own advantage, and of lifting up ourselves over and against the Creator.

In Francis's understanding, the first sin of the human person is fundamentally one of injustice. Rather than acknowledging the rights of the Creator in setting a limit on the creature, the first human ignores these rights, takes what is not his, and attempts to establish himself as the center of the world. Rather than acknowledging the Lord as the primary initiator of all that is good, both in deed and in word, the first human makes those initiatives his own and, thereby, exalts himself. The relations between Creator and creature are radically severed and the harmonious peace of the God-given world is shattered by self-seeking activities.

In light of this description of the Fall we are better able to understand why poverty stands out among all the traits that Francis envisions in Gospel life. Although he never treats it as an end in itself, Francis considered poverty as an integral part of his life and that of his followers. It was a short cut to dealing more effectively with the roots of our sins. In both the *Earlier* and *Later Rules*, for example, the process of entrance into the fraternity begins when a man sells his possessions, gives the proceeds to the poor, and, as a poor person, comes to the brothers.<sup>28</sup> Thomas of Celano's description of the entrance of Bernard of Quintavalle reiterates this. After observing Francis's conduct, Bernard hastens to sell all his goods and gives the money to the poor. "When he had done this," Thomas observes, "he was associated with St. Francis by his life and by his habit.... His conversion was a model to others in the manner of

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<sup>28</sup>Cf. Francis of Assisi, *Earlier Rule* II 2-7; *Later Rule* II 5-8.

selling one's possessions and giving them to the poor."<sup>29</sup> The implication of this process is, of course, that entrance into the company of Francis demands being materially poor, unencumbered by care for material things, and thus free to begin the journey of discovering the different levels of our appropriations.

Jacques de Champheleer maintains that there are one hundred and seven passages in Francis's writings which treat of poverty. "Seventy-three of these concern spiritual poverty," he states, "while only twenty-five concern material poverty. The nine remaining passages treat of poverty in general, and all the passages concerning material poverty — except those contained in the *Later Rule* — are combined with others centered on spiritual poverty."<sup>30</sup> Francis remarkably intuited that material poverty enables or frees us to begin the journey of discovering and resolving the depths of our appropriations, from our inner possessions, to those we claim in our relations with others, and, finally, to our relations with God.<sup>31</sup> Material poverty, in other words, takes on the nature of a sacrament: it is an outward sign of an inner reality, spiritual poverty, and, more importantly, an outward sign that leads to that deeper reality. As we embrace material poverty more seriously, we are prompted to identify more honestly our other appropriations until, when we are bereft of everything, God alone becomes our riches. Thus Francis's exhortation in the *Later Rule* has a certain urgency: "This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty that has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue (cf. Jas 2:5). Let this be your portion that leads into the land of the living (cf. Ps 142:6 [V 141:6]). Giving yourselves totally to this, beloved brothers, for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ never seek anything else under heaven."<sup>32</sup>

Of all his writings, however, Francis's *Seventh Admonition* speaks most pointedly about the poverty of the theologian:

The apostle says: *The letter kills, but the spirit gives life* (2 Cor 3:6).

<sup>29</sup>Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima* 24, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, edited by Marion A. Habig (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973) 248.

<sup>30</sup>Jacques de Champheleer, "La Pauvreté Franciscaine," *Études Franciscaines* 18(1968) 182.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Regis J. Armstrong, "The Prophetic Implications of the Admonitions," *Francescanesimo e Profezia*. Roma: Laurentianum, 1986; idem, *Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 136-176.

<sup>32</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Later Rule* VI 4-6.



Those people are put to death by the letter who only wish to know the words alone that they might be esteemed as wiser than others and be able to acquire great riches to give to their relatives and friends.

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.

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.

Francis's obvious point of departure is the Pauline contrast between the letter and the spirit, which he interprets as expressing the tension faced by the theologian called to articulate the mystery of God and to provide "spirit and life."<sup>33</sup> Yet the ever-realistic Francis deepens the tones of Paul's teaching by contrasting those who are "put to death" and those who are "brought to life." Among the lifeless, he suggests the myopic, text-absorbed scholar who approaches his studies in self-serving, earthbound ways, and the "professional" religious whose scholarship promotes a pharisaical, arrogant, and condescending approach to others. Basically Francis simply accentuates those death-dealing movements described in the *Second Admonition*: appropriation and self-exaltation. In contrast, however, he suggests the one imbued with life who, while being a scholar in his own right, admits to his ignorance, remains eager to learn, and views his insights as gifts. The first two portraits, in other words, are self-centered and self-serving; the third is thoroughly other-centered and expressive of a self-deprecating acknowledgment.

Does this *Seventh Admonition* suggest that Francis perceived the disciplined life of the theologian or scholar as offering more hidden, subtle temptations? Undoubtedly Francis's reluctance to encourage the uneducated (*et non curent nescientes litteras discere*) is an indication of his fear that a scholarly life, as that of a local minister or of a preacher, presents its own pitfalls.<sup>34</sup> The *Seventh Admonition* presumes that those involved in the pursuit of learning were fulfilling their call in the same material poverty advocated in Francis's *Rules*, yet it challenges them to avoid the lethal temptations that easily entice successful theologians and to give themselves, instead, to the more life-giving activities of looking beyond themselves and the printed page before them.

<sup>33</sup>When writing of the respect that must be shown to a theologian, in his *Testament* Francis provides this description: "We must honor all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life (cf. John 6:63)."

<sup>34</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Later Rule* X 7.

We have already seen how identification with the biblical *anawim* led Francis to a fuller knowledge of God. As he went about Assisi begging, however, he undoubtedly became convinced that material poverty assures a greater solidarity with the oppressed and the powerless. At the same time, it provides opportunities of perceiving more clearly God's largesse. Albert Gelin claims: "The whole Bible from Amos to St. James and from Deuteronomy to Jesus considers poverty (and the word has an extension greater than the simple privation of money) as an extreme state disturbing our conscience."<sup>35</sup> If, as many contextual theologians suggest, the whole problem of liberation consists in displacing the "god of self" and replacing it with the true God, then the most effective path is through poverty.<sup>36</sup> The poor, in other words, are truly free to love. Francis would have us, as those who have voluntarily accepted the paradoxical riches of the materially poor, speak of God in ways that resonate deeply with the *anawim*, the chosen instruments revealing the Almighty.

Discussions of contemporary expressions of this core Franciscan value continue to abound. In many circles they have become more heated in light of the call of Paul VI to religious in general: "How then will the cry of the poor find an echo in your lives?"<sup>37</sup> Poor themselves, followers of Francis should be in the forefront of those who articulate the mysteries of faith from the perspective of the poor, comfortable with socio-phenomenological methods which begin in economic and social analysis of the society and the individual.<sup>38</sup> Embracing poverty in confident hope of the kingdom promised by Christ, theirs should be not only a theology witnessing to the transcendent value of that inheritance, but also one of a realized eschatology stimulating the poor to recognize God's presence in their suffering and need.

More demanding, however, is Francis's challenge to be poor and, hence, dependent upon the prompting of the Spirit in our approaches to and articulations of the mystery of God. Nowhere are the implications of this poverty

<sup>35</sup> Albert Gelin, *The Poor of Yabweb*, translated by Kathryn Sullivan (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1963) 111.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Ignacio Larrañaga, *Sensing Your Hidden Presence: Toward Intimacy with God*, trans. John W. Dierchmeiser and Rigoberto Caloca-Rivas (Garden City: Image Books, 1987) 207-211.

<sup>37</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of the Religious Life according to the Teachings of the Second Vatican Council*, *Evangelica Testificatio* 18 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1971) 7. An excellent perspective on the renewal of religious life and the call to prophetic justice can be found in Wayne Hellmann, "Religious Life: A Call for Prophetic Justice," *Theology Digest* 28 (Winter, 1980) 349-355.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. John J. Mueller, *What Are They Saying about Theological Method?* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984) 56-70.

better seen than in Francis's *Letter to Brother (Saint) Anthony*: "I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers as long as you 'do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion' during study of this kind, as is contained in the Rule." While this straight-forward endorsement of Anthony's request echoes the fifth chapter of the *Later Rule* encouraging manual labors, Francis inportates the same advice for a theologian. From this perspective, his words are a call to theologize in the context of devotion and prayer, that is, to develop a more affective rather than cognitive approach, as the word *devotio* suggests, and to a more dependent or petitioning approach, as the medieval concept of *oratio* implies.<sup>39</sup> More profoundly, however, these words recall Francis's understanding of the theologian as one who ministers "spirit and life" by accentuating the priority of the Spirit. Theologians who struggle to live poorly, in other words, approach their craft with an awareness that their endeavors must be submissive to the prompting of the Spirit. Their poverty simply accentuates their dependency upon the Spirit of Truth which creates a restlessness, an ever-present dissatisfaction with their expressions of the God who is, and which causes them to explore ever-new depths of the divine mystery.

*The Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* maintains that a commitment to theology "requires a spiritual effort to grow in virtue and holiness."<sup>40</sup> This demand becomes more important, the Congregation declares, in light of a theologian's obligation to develop a critical spirit which is not born of feeling or prejudice. By claiming that the Spirit's activity is paramount in the craft of theology, Francis more than re-iterates the importance of a theologian's spirituality. Since it is of Truth, the Spirit's activities are essential to the enterprise of theology itself and demand receptivity and cooperation. Ignace DeLaPotterie and Stanislaus Lyonnet underscore this role of the Spirit in their discussion of "a complement to revelation reserved to the Spirit."<sup>41</sup> "Like a knowledgeable guide," they maintain, "the Spirit of truth must 'lead' the disciples toward the whole truth. According to John's

<sup>39</sup> Concerning the meaning of *devotio*, cf. Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988) 110-114. Concerning the medieval sense of *oratio*, cf. Timothy Johnson, *Iste Pauper Clamavit: Saint Bonaventure's Mendicant Theology of Prayer* (Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1990) 44-58.

<sup>40</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 20:8 (July 5, 1990) 120.

<sup>41</sup> Ignace DeLaPotterie and Stanislaus Lyonnet, *The Christian Lives by the Spirit*, with a Preface by Yves Congar, translated by John Morriss (Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1971) 65.



text, the truth toward which the Holy Spirit must lead is the truth of Jesus, that of his teaching, his work, his whole person. The Spirit must enable us to penetrate the heart of this truth and discover its fullness."<sup>42</sup> By encouraging his followers to "desire above all else to have the Spirit of the Lord and its holy activity," Francis implicitly urges theologians to let go of everything and to be always sensitive to its initiatives. In a sense, his words anticipate those of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "The theologian," it teaches, "must discern in himself the origin of and motivation for his critical attitude and allow his gaze to be purified by faith."<sup>43</sup> Only in this way will he be ready to plum new depths, explore a variety of paradigms, and articulate new expressions. In this regard, the words of Paul VI are apropos:

The Spirit of the Lord, who animates those renewed in Christ, continually breaks down the horizons within which their understanding finds security and the limits to which their activity would willingly restrict itself; there dwells within them a power which urges them to go beyond every system and every ideology. At the heart of the world there dwells the mystery of the human person discovering itself to be God's child in the course of a historical and psychological process in which constraint and freedom as well as the weight of sin and the breath of the Spirit alternate and struggle for the upper hand.<sup>44</sup>

Such reliance on the Spirit comes with an awareness of one's poverty and dependence upon God's goodness. In a curious combination of quotations, Francis reminds us that: "The apostle says: *No one can say: Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit* (1 Cor 12:3); and: *There is not one who does good, not even one* (Rom 3:12)." He, who encouraged his followers to approach the divine mysteries in the Spirit of truth, looked upon Jesus and all creation through the eyes of the Spirit and thereby became what many Eastern writers consider the only true theologian, a contemplative.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> DeLaPotterie-Lyonnet, 65-66.

<sup>43</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 20:8 (July 5, 1990) 120.

<sup>44</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Letter on the Occasion of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Encyclical Rerum Novarum, Octogesimo Adveniens* 37, with commentary by George G. Higgins (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1971) 19.

<sup>45</sup> For further insights into these theme as examined from the perspective of Francis's writings, see Philip Blaine, "The Spirit of Truth in the Writings of Francis of Assisi," *Miscellanea Franciscana* 92 (1992) 373-411.

### The "Contuitive" Contemplative

Francis expressed this activity of the Spirit most clearly when he teaches of its place in penetrating the mystery of God. "The Father dwells in *inaccessible light* (cf. 1 Tim 6:16)," he writes in his *First Admonition*, "and *God is spirit* (John 4:24), and *no one has ever seen God* (John 1:18). He cannot be seen, therefore, except in the Spirit because *it is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer* (John 6:63)."<sup>46</sup> Never losing sight of the central role of Christ in revealing to us the Trinitarian nature of God, Francis immediately adds: "But neither is the Son, inasmuch as He is equal to the Father, seen by anyone other than the Father or other than the Holy Spirit."<sup>47</sup> The Spirit, Francis realizes, is that mysterious energy of love in the very inner life of God which enables the Lover and the Loved, the Father and the Son, to see and know one another. Yet that same Spirit is now poured into us providing us that same power of seeing and, in our case, believing. To see with these "eyes of the Spirit," moreover, brings us deeper into the heart of God so that we are now empowered to see and believe according to the Divinity, that is, to look upon the Son with a share in the power of the Father or to look upon the Father with a share in the power of the Son, that is, in the power of the Spirit. "All those who saw the Lord Jesus according to the humanity," Francis declares, "and did not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Divinity that He is the true Son of God were condemned."<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, Francis extends the Spirit's power in recognizing the continuing revelation of God in the Eucharist: "Now in the same way, all those who see the sacrament sanctified by the words of the Lord upon that altar at the hands of the priest in the form of bread and wine, and 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." While this theology is extraordinary in itself, Francis's manner of contrasting the "vision of the flesh" with that "of the Spirit" tells us of the authority that he attributed to the Spirit of truth. "As he revealed himself to the holy apostles in true flesh," Francis continues, "so he reveals himself to us now in sacred bread. And as they 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, as we see bread and wine with our bodily

<sup>46</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Admonition I* 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> *Admonition I* 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Admonition I* 8.

eyes, see and firmly believe that they are his most holy Body and Blood living and true."<sup>49</sup>

The *First Admonition* clearly shows how profoundly Francis absorbed the theology of John. It also becomes a key to opening the meaning of spiritual sight, a theme that we frequently encounter in his writings. In his commentary of Johannine Christology, Bruce Vawter suggests that no other New Testament author has laid such a stress on faith as vision (cf. John 1:14, 50-51; 6:40; 14:9; 17:24; 1 John 1:5) so that faith gives a vision of God and of all created things in light of God.<sup>50</sup> As we have seen, Francis echoes that theology in reminding us that without the power of the Spirit, we cannot see the mystery of Christ in the flesh or in the Eucharist. He returns to that teaching in the *Letter to the Entire Order* when he encourages the brothers called to priesthood to see the great dignity that has been given to them because of their unique, intimate relationship with the Eucharist. "See your dignity, brothers [who are] priests (cf. 1 Cor 1:26)," he writes, "and be holy because He is holy (cf. Lev 19:2). As the Lord God has honored you above all others because of this ministry, for your part love, revere and honor Him above all others. It is a great misery and a miserable weakness that you are concerned with anything else in the whole world when you have Him present in this way!"<sup>51</sup> And, in words similar to those of the *First Admonition*, Francis once again draws attention to seeing when he urges those same brothers to focus on the humility of God: "See the humility of God, brothers, and *pour out your hearts before Him* (Ps 62:8 [V61: 9])! Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him (cf. 1 Pt 5:6; Jas 4:10)! Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!"<sup>52</sup>

Yet Francis does not limit this activity of the Holy Spirit to seeing only the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Eucharist. The *Sixteenth Admonition* alone shows us his interpretation of the Sixth Beatitude concerning the clean of heart: "*Blessed are the clean in heart, for they will see God* (Mt 5:8). The truly clean of heart are those who look down upon earthly things, seek those of

<sup>49</sup> *Admonition I 9.*

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Vawter, "Johannine Theology," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968) 835. For a treatment of the biblical theme of seeing, see Jean Duplacy and Jacques Guillet, "See," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Xavier Léon-Dufour, (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1967) 466-467.

<sup>51</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Letter to the Entire Order* 23-26.

<sup>52</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Letter to the Entire Order* 26-29.



heaven, and never cease adoring and seeing the Lord God living and true with a clean heart and spirit." In light of this we can more easily understand his encouragement of the spiritually blind, those who have not embraced a life of penance, to open their spiritual eyes and see, otherwise they will continue to be misled by "the flesh, the world and the devil."<sup>53</sup> Paradoxically, Francis's looking down upon earthly things eventually enabled him to see them with different eyes and, in his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, to extol them as reflections of the Triune God.<sup>54</sup>

At the beginning of the first chapter of his *Legenda major*, Bonaventure describes Francis's conversion in terms of not having a spirit for scrutinizing the divine mysteries and not knowing how the truth by moving through visible things to "contuit" invisible things.<sup>55</sup> Bonaventure employs a rarely used verb, *contuere*, to describe Francis's knowledge of what was beyond his sight. In this instance, however, it is brought into the realm of Franciscan life as the then General Minister encourages his brothers not only to admire Francis but to imitate him as well.<sup>56</sup> The call to contuit, he suggests, is part of the Franciscan process of conversion empowering us to pass through the visible to the invisible.

Contuition became a word generally associated with Bonaventure's teaching on the foundations of our knowledge of the Infinite Being. It is a word that is difficult to define. We catch a glimpse of its meaning in the *Journey of the Soul into God*. After our mind has "contuited" God outside itself through his vestiges and in his vestiges, Bonaventure writes, "it remains for our mind, by contemplating these things, to transcend and pass over not only this sense world but even itself."<sup>57</sup> In the fourth question of his *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, Bonaventure maintains that certain knowledge is possible because in knowledge, we are given not only contingent particulars, but also

<sup>53</sup> Francis of Assisi, *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful* 2:1-14; *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* 65-71; *Earlier Rule* VIII 4; XXI 8; XXII 19-21.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Regis J. Armstrong, *Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Bonaventure, *Legenda major* I 3 "...cum nondum haberet exercitatum animum ad divina perscrutanda mysteria nesciretque per visibilibus species transire ad contuendam invisibilium veritatem."

<sup>56</sup> I owe these insights into Bonaventure's theory of contuition to Kateryna Fedoryka, "Certainty and the Contuition: Saint Bonaventure's Contribution to the Theory of Knowledge;" and to Jacques-Guy Bougerol, "Contuition," *Lexique Saint Bonaventure*, (Paris: Éditions Franciscaines, 1969) 41-46.

<sup>57</sup> Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God* VII 1. Translation is taken from *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey Into God, the Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978) 110-111.

the eternal reasons in those particulars. The two are co-intuited — *contuita* — in any experience which yields certain knowledge.<sup>58</sup> As Zachary Hayes suggests:

when we know the true reality of a created thing, we know it not simply as it stands in itself, but more deeply in its relation to the archetype of which it is a symbolic representation in space and time. One does not see light; one sees the objects of experience in the medium of light. So here, one does not see the eternal reasons; one sees the objects of experience in the light shed on them by the eternal reasons.<sup>59</sup>

The third distinction of the *Second Book of the Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* underscores the role of the divine light in this process, while the twenty-third accentuates that of faith.<sup>60</sup> The *Breviloquium*, meanwhile, suggests the role of grace. Before writing of our triple vision, Bonaventure writes: "In the state of innocence, when the image had not yet been distorted but was conformed to God through grace, the book of creation was sufficient to enable the human person to contuit the light of divine Wisdom."<sup>61</sup>

We find ourselves in the Neo-Platonic, Bonaventurian world of the divine ideas, illumination, and exemplarism, a far cry from that of the Gospel simplicity of Francis. Yet this is also the world of the Seraphic Doctor who wrote of the contemplative Francis: "In beautiful things he 'contuited' Beauty itself and through his vestiges imprinted on creation he followed his Beloved everywhere making from all things a ladder by which he could climb up and embrace him who is utterly desirable."<sup>62</sup> Bonaventure found *contuere* as the most appropriate verb to express the process of recognizing the divine mysteries and the truth by moving through the visible to the invisible. Francis alone, he suggests, did not simply intuit these mysteries. He was undoubtedly assisted by the divine power, that is, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, that is, of

<sup>58</sup>Bonaventure, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Scientia Christi*, *Questio* IV, *Concl.* "For certain knowledge, the eternal reason is necessarily involved as the regulative and motivating principle, but certainly not as the sole principle nor in its full clarity. But along with the created reason, it is contuited by us in part as is fitting in this life." Translation taken from *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, translation and introduction by Zachary Hayes, (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1992) 134.

<sup>59</sup>Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ, translation and introduction by Zachary Hayes, (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1992) 58.

<sup>60</sup>Bonaventure, *II Sentences*, d.3, p. 2, l.2, q.3, fund 6 (II, 123); II Sent., d. 23, a.2, q.3, *concl.* (II, 544).

<sup>61</sup>Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* II, 12:4. Translation is that of the author.

<sup>62</sup>Bonaventure, *Legenda major* IX 1. This passage was originally found in Thomas of Celano's *Vita secunda*. Bonaventure, however, changed Thomas's verb *cognoscit* to *contuebatur*.

grace. His reflections undoubtedly led him to reflect upon what Thomas Torrance calls "the epistemological relevance of the Holy Spirit."<sup>63</sup> As he grew ever stronger in the life of the Spirit, Francis fell ever more vulnerable to the working of the Spirit of truth. The world upon which he gazed spoke to him not of the self-centered pleasures in which he once took delight. It became for this "contuitive" contemplative a never-ending revelation of the Triune God.

Curiously we never find the word *contemplatio*, contemplation, or any of its variants in the writings of Francis. As we might expect of an itinerant preacher, he writes of the same reality by using *quies* or *quietas*, a relief from exertion, an absence of activity, or quite simply rest or peacefulness.<sup>64</sup> Jean Leclercq has shown how firmly this concept is present in the medieval monastic tradition and suggested that, in its development, a more attitudinal than spatial perspective was taken.<sup>65</sup> *Quies claustris*, for example, although associated with the quiet of the enclosure, expresses the themes of solitude as well as fraternal charity. More commonly we find *quies mentis* referring to silence, austerity, mortification, and the pursuit of monastic virtues. Yet far more frequently the phrase *quies contemplationis* substitutes for *otium* [freedom from business or work], *vacatio* [leisure], and, at times, *devotio*, desire or anticipation.<sup>66</sup> In his inimitable way, Octavian Schmucki has shown how this vocabulary is present in the early hagiographic literature surrounding Francis, especially in portraits of Thomas of Celano.<sup>67</sup>

In the fourth century Evagrius was one of the first to link theology with contemplation.<sup>68</sup> While Francis would not have written in the same terms as Evagrius, he would unquestionably see the theologian as a contemplative, that is, one who teaches about the God by whom he has been taught and to whom

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Thomas F. Torrance, "The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit," *God and Rationality* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971) 165-192.

<sup>64</sup>*Quies* appears only in *Admonition XXVII* 4 where it appears together with *meditatio*. It also appears in the *Praises of God* 4 where Francis identifies God alone as *quietas*.

<sup>65</sup>Jean Leclercq, *Études sur le Vocabulaire Monastique du Moyen-âge* (Rome: Studia Anselmiana, 1961).

<sup>66</sup>Jean Leclercq, *Otia Monastica: Études sur le Vocabulaire de la Contemplation au Moyen-âge*, (Rome: Studia Anselmiana, 1963).

<sup>67</sup>Octavian Schmucki, "A Place of Solitude: An Essay on the External Circumstances of the Prayer Life of St. Francis of Assisi," *Greyfriars Review* 2:1 (1968) 77-132; idem, "Mentis Silentium: Contemplation in the Early Franciscan Order," *Greyfriars Review* 4:2 (1990) 35-71.

<sup>68</sup>Evagrius, *Praktikos*, Introductory Letter to Anatolius, introduction with notes by John Eudes Bamberger (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 14. Further information can be found in Marcel Viller and Karl Rahner, *Ascese und Mystik in der Väterzeit. Ein Abriss*, (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1993).



he is led. As we have seen, his letter to Anthony of Padua certainly confirms his insistence upon the foundations of devotion and prayer upon which the theologizing work of a brother must be built. In the context of the *Later Rule*, Francis writes, however, that manual work must contribute to "the Spirit of prayer and devotion,"<sup>69</sup> a directive which can easily be extended to include the work of a theologian. Prayer, then, a principal activity of the Spirit, must be the starting-point of our theologizing, but it must also be its culmination. For the intuitive theologian, one who gazes upon the world with the eyes of the Spirit, every moment becomes, to borrow Thomas Merton's expression, "a seed of contemplation."

### The Privileged Contexts of Theology

"Down to earth 'historical' reality," suggests Alexander Gerken, "and the revelation of heavenly glory — which is also very real — fused in Francis, never to be separated, because he understood so well that the glory of the eternal God chose our darkness and frailty as the locus in which to shed his light through the Incarnation."<sup>70</sup> That understanding drove Francis to mine ever more fully, as the biblical searcher of hidden treasure, the depths of the Gospels. He engaged in this enterprise, however, as someone committed to incarnating the mysteries of Christian life. Any theology he may have inspired must do the same. By its very nature as a human enterprise, in other words, theology demands a reflection on the historical and even socio-economic circumstances in which it is pursued. In this sense, Iammarrone's reflections on the validity of a theology emerging from a medieval Mediterranean-Western tradition are quite apropos.

What, we might wonder, were the environments in which this penitent, poor, and intuitive contemplative theologized? Once again we must return to Francis's *Testament* for the reflections of a dying man on the significant events of his life. After recalling his conversion and his experiences of the Church, Francis continues by reflecting on those who followed his example. "After the Lord gave me some brothers," he writes, "no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live

<sup>69</sup> Francis uses the word *deservire* which we have translated "to contribute." The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* offers these possible alternatives: "to spend one's time in the service of, to devote oneself (to pursuits, interests; to an employment), to serve." Cf. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, edited by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> Alexander Gerken, "The Theological Intuition of St. Francis of Assisi," *Greyfriars Review* 7:1 (1993) 77.

according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel."<sup>71</sup> Significantly, Francis had already embraced a penitential, somewhat contemplative lifestyle and had discovered the Gospel call to material poverty when his first followers came to him. In his *Testament*, however, he reflects upon the role of his brothers in his awakening to the pattern of life he discovered in the Gospel. From this simple comment, reinforced by so many incidents in his life, we can see the mediating role his brothers assumed in providing the context of Francis's theology. The Gospel upon which he reflected was one of brothers (and sisters) centered on Jesus, the Word of God, and through it Francis discovered a world caught up in relationships; even the sun, moon, and all creatures became his brothers and sisters.

While our contemporary literature on fraternal life is abundant, accentuation of its place in the Franciscan tradition is a relatively recent phenomenon.<sup>72</sup> Cajetan Esser, for example, laments in his *Origins of the Franciscan Order* that, while it is "one of the outstanding traits of the Christian example given by the community which grew around Francis," this fact "has been overlooked too frequently up to this."<sup>73</sup> *Fraternal Life in Community*, however, recently issued by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, has shown how the Second Vatican Council promoted a re-evaluation of fraternal life because of its development of a rich ecclesiology which placed religious life "at the very heart of the church's mystery of communion and holiness."<sup>74</sup> This contemporary awareness has prompted us to look anew at the contributions made to Christian theology through the fraternal mediation underscored by Francis. Two contributions in particular stand out in Francis's own way of developing its incarnational character and its affectivity.

"The identity of a consecrated person," *Fraternal Life in Community* states, "depends on spiritual maturity; this is brought about by the Spirit, who

<sup>71</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Testament* 14.

<sup>72</sup> The words "fraternal" and "fraternity" refer inclusively to both women and men and are, in my judgment, the words most apt in English for conveying the fullness and warmth of communion which lies at the heart of community. Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, "Fraternal Life in Community," *Origins, CNS Documentary Service*, 23: 40 (March 24, 1994) 712, note 1.

<sup>73</sup> Cajetan Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order*, trans. Aeden Daly and Irina Lynch (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970), 240.

<sup>74</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, "Fraternal Life in Community," *Origins, CNS Documentary Service*, 23: 40 (March 24, 1994).

prompts us to be conformed to Christ"<sup>75</sup> No one verifies this statement as fully as Francis of Assisi, whose writings show how completely he identified with and matured in response to the call of God he discovered in the Son of God. The thoroughly Gospel-oriented Francis imprinted its contours on every dimension of his life. An essential aspect of those contours was the discovery that Christ was indeed his brother. "O how holy and how loving," he proclaims in his exhortations, "gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet, worthy of love, and above all things desirable it is to have such a Brother and such a Son: our Lord Jesus Christ, Who laid down His life for His sheep (cf. John 10:15)"<sup>76</sup> As he identified with the bonds of fraternity he found in Christ, Francis inevitably deepened those with others, became the brother of us all, and offered us a unique way of maturing in Gospel life. With this maturity, as *Fraternal Life in Community* reminds us, we acquire "the tools necessary for discerning future trends and working out appropriate responses in which the Gospel is continuously proposed as the alternative to worldly proposals, integrating its positive forces and purifying them of the leaven of evil."<sup>77</sup>

Throughout his writings Francis describes his understanding of the fraternal life proposed by the Gospel and challenges his follower to incarnate the ways of Jesus in deepening its bonds. We cannot read Francis's writings without becoming aware of the driving force of love that inspired his relations with others, especially his brothers. "Wherever the brothers may be and meet one another," he states in the *Later Rule*, "let them show that they are members of the same family. Let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for if a mother loves and cares for her child according to the flesh (cf. 1 Thes 2:7), how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit!"<sup>78</sup> In such an environment, we can well imagine growing in maturity, freedom and a balanced affectivity in which love of God and love of a brother are intertwined.

Of all the Christological images proposed by Francis in deepening that fraternity, however, that of the patient, suffering servant appears repeatedly and of these that of the one who assumes a position at the feet of his disciples is the most powerful. Francis uses it most forcefully in the *Earlier Rule* where

<sup>75</sup>"Fraternal Life," 702.

<sup>76</sup>Francis of Assisi, *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful* 1: 13; *Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful* 56.

<sup>77</sup>Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, "Fraternal Life in Community 36," *Origins, CNS Documentary Service*, 23: 40 (March 24, 1994).

<sup>78</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Later Rule* VI 8.

he characterizes the lesser brother. "Let no one be called prior," he writes, "but let everyone be generally called a lesser brother." And he immediately adds: "And let one wash the feet of the other."<sup>79</sup> The *Admonitions* continue this imagery by considering this identification with Christ in the day-to-day context of fraternal life. The *Fourth Admonition*, for example, describes the role of a *praelatus*, a "superior," in those very images and suggests that not to do so would be equivalent to clinging to Judas's purse or risking salvation for a temporary gain.<sup>80</sup> In a similar, although more positive vein, Francis envisions a brother's place at the very feet of others: "*Blessed is that servant* (Mt 24:46) who is not placed in a high position by his own will and always desires to be under the feet of others."<sup>81</sup> In light of these images, Francis had to respond to his calling to be Christ's brother through the *kenosis* portrayed in the Gospel.

This high idealism becomes extremely difficult in light of Francis's continual reference to fraternity as an interpersonal reality that is not defined by apostolic, geographical, or sociological phenomena. (His failure to use the word *communitas*, as well as his rather limited use of *fraternitas*, eight times, in comparison with that of *frater*, more than three hundred times, is proof of his concrete, realistic understanding). It becomes evermore so in light of a brother's problems or difficulties. The *Third Admonition* and, even more dramatically, the *Letter to a Minister*, in which a minister is envisioned as suffering physical abuse from another, are perfect examples of these Gospel demands.

Theologizing from the position of being the "lesser brother" portrayed in the Gospel empowers us to articulate a theology that ascends from the perspective of the biblical *anawim*, of solidarity with the poor and downtrodden. This is particularly so if we accept Bernard Lonergan's interpretation of theology as a method rooted in the invariant structure of human consciousness, that is, a dynamism of self-transcendence that moves in a fourfold way from experience to understanding, thence to judgment, and finally to decision. Mature identification with Jesus, the patient, loving brother-servant, provides us with experiences that inevitably lead us to a theology of vulnerability and suffering. To theologize within the context of fraternity demands, however, a

<sup>79</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Earlier Rule* VI 3.

<sup>80</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Admonition IV* 2-3: Let those who are placed over others boast about that position as much as they would if they were assigned the duty of washing the feet of their brothers. If they are more upset at having their place over others taken away from them than at losing their position at their feet, the more they store up a *money bag* to the peril of their soul (cf. John 12:6).

<sup>81</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Admonition XIX* 4.



movement beyond the day-to-day experience of fraternal life. It presupposes, in Lonergan's terms, the dynamism of self-transcendence in which we reflect upon our experiences in order to understand, judge, and decide about them. Reflecting upon the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Avery Dulles observes: "Theology is a methodological inquiry into the meaning and grounding of what, in faith, is taken to be the word of God (*logos theou*). Because revelation proceeds from the divine intelligence and is addressed to the human intelligence, it calls for reflective assimilation."<sup>82</sup> There is, in other words, a certain demand for reflection as well as for leisure and for solitude. We have already discussed the role of *quies* or leisure in the writings and life of Francis. Of necessity a consideration of the theologizing of Francis demands that we turn our attention to the place of solitude.

At first glance these two contexts, fraternity and solitude, may seem contradictory. Indeed, with the phenomenon of the discovery of fraternity, concern for the strong pursuit of solitude so prevalent in the life of Francis has all but disappeared. Octavian Schmucki, moreover, has repeatedly shown how Francis continuously balanced his apostolic activity with long periods of solitude.<sup>83</sup> In "The Dialectic of Solitude and Communion in Cistercian Communities," Michael Casey has addressed this same apparent contradiction within the framework of Cistercian spirituality and shown not only how reconcilable but also how necessary both realities are for one who wishes to realize greater union with God.<sup>84</sup> In our own time, Thomas Merton exemplifies that tension. "The true solitary," he writes:

is one who realizes, though perhaps confusedly, that he has entered into a solitude that is really shared by everyone. What the solitary renounces is not his union with other men, but rather the deceptive fictions and inadequate symbols which tend to take the place of genuine social unity. He (the solitary) realizes that he is one with them in the peril and anguish of their common solitude: not the solitude of the individual only, but the radical and essential solitude of man — a solitude

<sup>82</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 105.

<sup>83</sup> Octavian Schmucki, "The Spirit of Prayer and the Active Life According to the Mind of St. Francis," *Greyfriars Review* 8:1 (1994) 31-35; idem, "A Place of Solitude: An Essay on the External Circumstances of the Prayer Life of St. Francis of Assisi," *Greyfriars Review* 2:1 (1968) 77-132; idem, "Mentis Silentium: Contemplation in the Early Franciscan Order," *Greyfriars Review* 4:2 (1990) 35-71.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Casey, "The Dialectic of Solitude and Communion in Cistercian Communities," *Cistercian Studies* (January 1988) 273-309.

which was assumed by Christ and which, in Christ, becomes mysteriously identified with the solitude of God."<sup>85</sup>

By balancing solitude and activity, in other words, Merton, as Francis before him, realizes that solitude enables us to enter more profoundly into the pathos of the world in which we live. "Solitude has its own special work," Merton maintains, "a deepening awareness that the world needs. A struggle against alienation. True solitude is deeply aware of the world's needs. It does not hold the world at arm's length."<sup>86</sup>

Fraternity is the crucible of Gospel life for a follower of Francis. To theologize as a penitent, poor, contemplative in the manner of Francis, in other words, demands a fraternal life, for in and through it, the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the Gospel becomes purified and strengthened. Such theologizing, however, also demands the discipline of solitude, the day-to-day search for the time and space necessary to be alone in order to be taught by God, to be drawn to God, and, finally, to speak about God. A theology that neglects any of these essential dimensions would be, for Francis, a theology that neglects the essential fact of revelation: God who took on our flesh to teach us, as a brother, how to deepen our union with our Creator and Redeemer.

### Conclusion

Throughout these reflections we have continually returned to Francis's *Testament*, that final synthesis of his vision which he made during his last days. In a sense, it is truly a sacred document, a covenant, in the interpretation of Auspicius VanCorstjanje, between God and the poor made through the mediation of Francis. This same document provides us one of Francis's most telling statements concerning theologians: "We must honor all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life (cf. John 6:63)."<sup>87</sup> It is typical of that Johannine flavor that, as we have already seen, permeates Francis's writings.

One of the earliest of his writings, however, an exhortation delivered to those first Brothers and Sisters of Penance, contains an echo of those same Johannine sentiments which prompt us to look at Francis as truly a theologian. "In the love which is God (cf. 1 John 4:16)," he writes, "we beg all those whom

<sup>85</sup>Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1976) 146-147.

<sup>86</sup>Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 11.

<sup>87</sup>Francis of Assisi, *Testament* 13.

these words reach to receive those fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ written above with divine love and kindness. And let whoever does not know how to read, have them read to them frequently. Because *they are spirit and life* (John 6:63), they should preserve them together with a holy activity to the end."<sup>88</sup>

We continually encounter articles on monastic theologizing which focus either on convergence of definite structural elements in the life itself such as expositions of the Rule and traditions, the method of the *lectio divina*, prayer, etc., or on previously lived monastic experience.<sup>89</sup> In both of these expressions of monastic theology, there is a general recognition that monasticism provides a specific cultural context in which we might obtain those "tools necessary for discerning future trends and working out appropriate responses in which the Gospel is continuously proposed as the alternative to worldly proposals, integrating its positive forces and purifying them of the leaven of evil."<sup>90</sup> "The core of monastic spirituality and its common theological articulation have to live on the blood of biblical realism," Matthias Neuman concludes. "This theologizing has much to assimilate from the varied sources of cultural humanism, and in the process of assimilation monasticism will achieve a more concrete appreciation and practice of its goals."<sup>91</sup>

In contrast to monastic spirituality which is essentially associated with a holy environment, the monastery, in which one may grow holy, Franciscan spirituality is fundamentally caught up in the person: the person of Francis of Assisi, a thirteenth century Umbrian who has always been regarded as the *forma minorum*, the pattern of the minors, that is, of the spiritual heritage that he bequeathed to history.

The tendency of the Franciscan school has been to look at its theology as integrally tied to its proponents: Bonaventure, Scotus, Peter Olivi, William of Ockham, and others. Most commentators would hardly look upon Francis himself as a theologian. Beyond Bonaventure, the mystical theologian whose writings were so largely influenced by his concerns as General Minister of the friars, little mention of Francis can even be found in many of the giants of the

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<sup>88</sup> Francis of Assisi, *First Version of the Letter to the Faithful* 2: 19-21.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Matthias Neuman, "Monastic Theology and the Dialogue with Cultural Humanism," *Monastic Studies* 12 (1976) 85-119.

<sup>90</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, "Fraternal Life in Community 36," *Origins, CNS Documentary Service*, 23:40 (March 24, 1994).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Matthias Neuman, "Monastic Theology and the Dialogue with Cultural Humanism," *Monastic Studies* 12 (1976) 119.

theology of his school. As he would appreciate, Francis is lost in the vast tomes written by his followers. Yet therein lies his methodology in approaching the mysteries of God: to be a penitential, poor, contuitive contemplative brother who moves from the visible to the Invisible, from the creature to the Creator, from the Word of God to Its Articulator. If his appropriation of Christ's claim — "My words are spirit and life" — seems audacious to us, they undoubtedly seemed quite natural to him. His penance, poverty and contuitive contemplation led him where it would lead us: to identification with the Word of God itself. That is the very nature of theology: to teach God, to be taught by God, and to lead to God.