

## THE TRADITIONS OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY – PART II

### FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY: THE HUMBLE REVOLUTION

I. Franciscan spirituality was first took shape as St. Francis and St. Clare formed the Franciscan order in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Some of its great teachers include St. Anthony of Padua, St. Bonaventure, and Blessed Duns Scotus.

A. St. Francis (1181-1225) was born to a wealthy family of merchants, but sensed a calling to renounce human wealth and privilege in favor of his greater vocation, to serve God through a radical witness of noble simplicity.

1. He was a first a generous, but often vain, young man and a soldier who desired to be a knight. He was not particularly successful in battles, but was still honored for his chivalry.

2. After a couple of military adventures, he received God's call in Assisi, "Rebuild my church" and saw a vision of Lady Poverty, whom he found to be supernaturally beautiful.

3. Attracted to this call, and believing that it was to be fulfilled in his home town, he left everything to rebuild the church of San Damiano in the outskirts of Assisi, in 1206 or 1207. His father rejected him and at first there was a time of public ridicule.

4. But his joyfulness of life attracted others to him and in 1209 or 1210, he and 11 disciples went to Rome to gain approval from Pope Innocent III for the new order. After some initial reluctance and a dream showing St. Francis upholding a church, Pope Innocent III gave approval. Within twelve years, there were more than 3000 friars throughout Europe.

5. In 1221, the laity began participating in what is called the Third Order Franciscans.

B. St. Clare of Assisi (1193-1253) was born to a noble family in Assisi. Her father died when she was young, but her mother and older sisters were members of a prayer group, and St. Clare grew up with great devotion.

1. Her family would have wished that, if she became a nun, she would be a Benedictine nun, a member of an established order. But, inspired by St. Francis, she wanted to make a radical commitment to Christ.

2. On Palm Sunday, 1212, she snuck out of her home and joined St. Francis' brothers, who found a home for her first with the Benedictines, and then in the church of San Damiano in Assisi.

3. A group of women soon formed around her and she wrote a rule that emphasized a life of great penance and poverty to show forth the power of God to the world. She very much emphasized this life as a journey to heaven, and wished to leave aside everything to make this journey with great fervor.

4. She persuaded Pope Gregory IX to give her order the "privilege of poverty," the ability to opt out of the economic order and rely totally on God's providence; this privilege was later made optional.

5. By the end of her life, the women's side of the order had spread to over 100 convents in Europe.

C. The Franciscans were a new type of order. They were mendicants, who begged or worked for their sustenance daily rather

than having stable properties like the Benedictines. There was an emphasis on fraternal union and a notion of each being brothers and sisters, in an early sort of democracy.

D. St. Anthony of Padua joined the order in 1220, at the age of 25. He had been a devout youth and joined the Augustinian order at the age of 17. Hearing about early Franciscan martyrs, he discerned a call to the Franciscans and was ordained a priest in 1221. People quickly realized his brilliance and preaching abilities, and he led a revival in Italy until his early death in 1231. He is called the Doctor of the Gospel for his abilities to put the Gospel scenes and images into familiar terms.

E. With the order growing rapidly, there were differences regarding how strict to live out poverty and the penance that St. Francis called for. St. Bonaventure was elected Master General 1257 and organized the order into more of what we see today.

1. Raised by a devout family, St. Bonaventure was interested in Franciscans and may have entered the order as early as 1238, at the age of 17.
2. Elected General of the Franciscans at the age of 36, he tried to keep together those who wanted a stricter rule for the few, and those who wanted to relax it for the many more who could not live by the strict poverty of St. Francis.
3. St. Bonaventure valued learning more than St. Francis, but like him emphasized that all learning should reflect our love of God or, as he put it, "every truth should be a prayer." Some of his major works are The Life of St. Francis, The Soul's Journey into God, and The Tree of Life.

F. Blessed Duns Scotus (1266-1308) entered the order young and was ordained a priest at the age of 25. He was among the most brilliant scholars of his age and defended what would later become the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

1. He endured a temporary exile from Paris, when the French king Philip II tried to get the clergy to side with him against the Pope
2. Blessed Duns Scotus very strongly emphasized the importance of the Incarnation, and thus of Christ sanctifying human life, and he called for a very personal focus on Christ, as an infant, on Calvary, and present with us in the Eucharist. He argued that the Incarnation would have taken place even without the Fall, a point that is still a subject of much debate.

3. Along with St. Bonaventure, he supported scholarship, but strongly maintained that devotion and a sense of God in all aspects of life is needed, lest this scholarship become dry and barren.

G. The Franciscan Order is lived out in numerous ways and has developed along many different lines throughout the world, forming what Fr. Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R. has called a tree with "three or four big trunks, innumerable branches and twigs." As he points out "St. Francis really started more of a movement than a religious community." I Will Be With You Always (2010) 101.

- In this country, Fr. Groeschel is a member of the Franciscans of the Renewal, which follows a fairly strict rule, and has produced many great preachers, most of all Fr. Groeschel. On the women's side, Mother Angelica, abbess of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Eternal Word monastery in Hanceville, Alabama, formed the Catholic television network EWTN.

- In this diocese, the likes of the contemplative Poor Clares in Alexandria and the Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist, whose convent is in St. Philip parish, provide a Franciscan presence here.

- In addition, there are very many Third Order (lay) Franciscan groups here and around the world.

II. Franciscan spirituality strongly emphasizes a desire for freedom through simplicity of life, detachment from worldly goods, and a radical dedication to God=s calling in any fashion.

A. Franciscan spirituality emphasizes humility, poverty, and seeing God everywhere. There is a notion of rising above dependence upon earthly things (e.g., possessions, positions, prestige, pleasure) to soar to the heavens.

- Through powerful penances, depriving oneself of earthly things, one liberates the spirit and senses a radical openness to God.

B. In Franciscan spirituality, there is a strong focus on a passionate repentance from sins and the power of God in wrenching us away from them.

1. St. Francis once said that he was the greatest of sinners. He knew that his way of life was considered holy, but was very aware that he had not used his gifts fully.

- When a theologian was puzzling over a passage in Ezekiel, 33:7-9, in which God tells the prophet that he must rebuke the sinner, St. Francis explained that that passage applies to everyone. However, most of the time, we do not rebuke others with words, but rather simply with a holy life, which stands as a continuing witness against sin.

2. St. Anthony often drew upon the Scriptural image of the word of God as a sword, or perhaps more accurately, scalpel, cutting off sin. See, e.g., Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16. His prayer before preaching included a desire that God "tough my lips that they may be like a sharp sword to set forth Thy truth." He once said that a sermon should "like a thorn, pierce the heart of the sinner and draw forth the blood of his rears, and cause him to have sorrow over his past sins." But he also very strongly emphasized how God is merciful and is eager to forgive.

- St. Anthony encouraged people to review their whole life periodically and focus on what things are tending to lead to sin. He had, by contrast, little patience with ill-prepared or rote Confessions.

3. There is what Professor Thomas Noble of Notre Dame once called "the democracy of sinners," the notion of a certain equality among us, precisely because we are all under a judgment that no money or power can buy our way out of. And so we all turn with great fervor to Christ, who in His humility raised us to a spiritual nobility.

C. There is a strong and vivid sense of the earthly reality of Christ with us, in the Incarnation, on Calvary and in the Eucharist

1. St. Francis very much promoted crèche scenes, especially living crèche scenes, to give us a strong sense that Jesus is with us here on earth, in the humblest guises. He established the first living crèche scene in Greccio, a small Italian town, in 1223, to give his brothers and then all of the faithful a vivid sense of what it was like in Bethlehem.

2. St. Clare said that we should see ourselves in the "mirror of the crucifix," that is see ourselves above all else as both saved by Christ and with Him in His suffering.

D. We live out this reality here and now, by making sacrifices in penance, and by experience the presence of Christ more and

more in the Eucharist, in which He comes to us here and now, again with His humble and saving power.

1. The Third Lateran Council in 1215 supported a number of reforms in the Church, including Eucharistic Adoration. St. Francis very strongly promoted this devotion. And he very much criticized people, especially clergy, who were careless about the Mass and the Eucharist.

2. St. Francis once said to his fellow clergy, "Let all of us, fellow clergy, consider the great sin some have toward the most Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus and His most holy name as and written words that consecrate His Body... . . . For we have nothing and see nothing corporally of the Most High in this world except His Body and Blood, His names and written words through which we have been made and redeemed from death to life." See Fr. Groeshel, I Am With You Always 102.

3. When the forces of the Emperor Frederick II tried to invade Assisi, St. Clare prayed that God would drive them off. She then showed them the Eucharist and they fled in terror. It is an image of sins fleeing when we meditate in front of the Eucharist with devotion.

E. Through this meditation on the Incarnation of Christ, especially His humility in Bethlehem and on the Cross, we sense the nobility of God in those in need and this in ministering to the least. The triumph of bringing the love of God to places where it seems so absent is seen as a striking victory, more so than any of an earthly type.

1. There is a desire to be as open to evangelization as the Apostles were of old, and as contemptuous of the standards of the world as they were.

2. St. Francis advanced rapidly in his conversion when he saw a leper and, despite his revulsion, spent time with him. He said that, after that, he could be joyful in all circumstances and see the presence of God in all people.

3. The Franciscan spirit involves very strongly a sense of recognizing in each person a great nobility, for each person is called by God to be a glorious saint beyond anything we can imagine. Although not a Franciscan, or even Catholic, C.S. Lewis reflects this view when he says in his essay, *The Weight of Glory*, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person may be one day a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror or corruption such that you now see,

if at all, only in a nightmare. . . . There are no ordinary people. You never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to our as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."

4. It is also in meditating upon that humility and suffering of Christ that we recognize that we ourselves are closest to Christ when we struggle and when we serve, as Christ Himself says. See Mark 10:42-45. And, as the parable of the Judgment of Nations indicates, it is precisely in the least among us, that we see Jesus' glory most of all. See Matt. 25:31-46.

F. There is also a strong sense of the power of God present in Nature, not simply when it is enjoyable and comfortable, but even when it is unpleasant and difficult.

1. St. Francis wrote his famous Canticle of the Creatures in 1224 when he was very ill and in fact close to death. Even in such circumstances, he wrote the following lines, calling upon the praise of God through nature.

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,  
All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor and all blessings.  
To you alone, Most High, do they belong,  
and no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,  
especially Sir Brother Sun,  
Who is the day through whom You give us light.  
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,  
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,  
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,  
by which You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,  
So useful, humble, precious and pure.

Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night  
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,  
Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,  
producing varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.  
Praise be You my Lord through those who grant pardon  
for love of You and bear sickness and trial.  
Blessed are those who endure in peace,  
By You Most High, they will be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death,  
from whom no-one living can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!  
Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.  
No second death can do them harm.

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,  
And serve Him with great humility.

2. St. Bonaventure famously compared nature to God's artwork, which reflects, albeit imperfectly, the glory of God. In *The Soul's Journey into God*, he says, "These creatures are shadows, echoes and pictures of that first, most powerful,



most wise and more perfect principle of that eternal Source, light and Fullness, of that efficient, exemplary and ordering Art. They are vestiges, representations, spectacles proposed to us as signs divinely given so that we can see God."

G. There is a strong notion of this life as a journey to heaven through many storms and dangers, but guided by Christ and Mary. Detachment from an addiction to worldly things (possessions, power, and prestige) allows us to make this

1. St. Anthony composed the prayer, "Our Lady, Star of the Sea, shine upon us in our distress on the sea of life, and lead us to safe harbor and the ineffable joy of eternity."

2. The centerpiece of St. Clare's rule ends with a reflection on the exhortation of Jesus, "He who perseveres to the end will be saved." Mark 13:13. She describes our earthly journey as the "path of the Lord" that is very difficult, but that leads to great blessedness and, even now, to a sense that Jesus and the saints are journeying with us. See Sr. Karen Karper, Clare: Her Light and Her Song (1984) 363.

3. One of St. Bonaventure's great works is The Soul's Journey Into God. He describes the great ways in which we can reflect upon God's presence, through the glory of God in the material world and our experience of God, through the reflection of God in our own mental and spiritual abilities, especially redeemed by grace, and through a reflection of the majesty and goodness of God. He insists, however, that we must enter this journey, always and everywhere, by a reflection upon the cross of Christ. Without that devotion, we will not make any spiritual progress. And, as he says in the prologue, we must not "believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavor without divine grace, reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom."

H. This sense of the presence of God everywhere leads to the joyfulness that is central to Franciscan thought.

1. This joy is not a mere feeling of happiness, much less pleasure. Rather, it is a sense of thrill, excitement, and blessedness at the presence of the divine.

2. One does not seek joy for its own sake, but rather seeks the adventure of a radical openness to serving God. But this radical, and in fact mystical, openness to God allows one to take joy at all goodness.

3. This joy is no longer dependant upon getting things in the way one wants them, for earthly desires are disciplines and focused on Jesus. Joyfulness of spirit becomes the reward and sign of the actions of grace in one=s life.

4. This joyfulness leads to a sense of peacefulness regardless of external circumstances, and a sense of the goodness of God in all situations. Thus, the motto of the Franciscan order becomes "Pax et Bonum" or "Peace and Good."

I. The Franciscan spirit thus tries to promote a paradoxically humble revolution. There is a great humility of spirit in disciplining one=s desires, for power, pleasure, prestige, and the like. All glory is directed to God and away from self; if any human is to receive glory, it is the least in the world. This great humility acts as a revolt against the world=s worship of false gods.