

Custodians of the Tradition

*Reclaiming the Franciscan
Intellectual Tradition*



Those like ourselves who are immediate heirs of the tradition inspired by the spirituality of Francis [and Clare] might better see ourselves as responsible stewards of a treasure that has much to offer for the healing of humanity and of the world at large.

Zachary Hayes OFM
Bonaventure Fest, 2003, Aston, PA



The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: Contemporary Concerns

By Ilia Delio OSF



*In the context of lived experience,
tradition finds its deepest meaning.*

Introduction

What is the “*Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*”? Can it be a public voice in today’s church, today’s post-modern world? Is the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* about book-learning, academic study; or about a set of theologically informed values, based on the theological intuitions of Francis of Assisi, that comprise a distinct view of the world?

Initially the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* had a profound influence on the shape of Franciscan evangelical life. The writings of Celano and Bonaventure formulated a synthesis of evangelical life and evangelical theology. This synthesis collapsed in later years leaving an elite school of thought divorced from the tradition of Franciscan life. The *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* then developed as a “tradition within a tradition”.

Recently efforts have been made to renew the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* in light of Franciscan evangelical life.

Is the “Franciscan Intellectual Tradition” a Tradition?

Yves Congar has described a tradition as a “spontaneous assimilation of the past in understanding the present, without a brake in the continuity of a society’s life, and without considering the past as outmoded.”¹ Cicero once claimed that tradition is like a second nature.² It follows then that tradition is integral to identity.

Franciscan tradition involves a *core set of values* such as poverty, conversion and peacemaking which have been maintained in an identifiable way through rules and customs passed down through succeeding generations. The first question concerning the existence of *core values/beliefs* can be answered with assurance. From the time of Francis certain fundamental themes are evident in the tradition. These include:

- an emphasis on divine love and freedom,
- the primacy of Christ, the centrality of the Incarnation and, in particular Christ crucified,

- the sacramentality of creation, the goodness of the world,
- the human person as image of God,
- an emphasis on poverty and humility,
- and the development of *affectus*.

While this is not an exhaustive list, it highlights the *key characteristics* of the tradition.

Tradition and Evangelical Life

While the *Franciscan intellectual tradition* may seem somewhat nebulous there is evidence that it originated in the *core values of Francis and Clare*. The term “intellectual” which implies book learning does not appropriately describe the distinct values of Francis and Clare. Bernard McGinn has identified both Francis and Clare as “vernacular” theologians, theologians in whom “*scientia* gave way to *sapientia*”. Vernacular theology, a third type of medieval theology (alongside scholastic and monastic theology) has been described as a “grassroots theology” in people like

Deceptively simple at first, the apparently verbal poverty of Francis’ writings, especially the prayers, hides unusual theological riches. What is most striking is the difference between Francis the writer and Francis the saint as portrayed by the theologians.

The Flowering of Mysticism, 51

Francis whereby the authority to teach came about not *ex officio* but rather *ex beneficio* or by the gift of Grace.³

Vernacular theology is finding its way into the mainstream of experiential theology. Zachary Hayes connects Franciscan spirituality and Francis theology through three key themes:

1. the humanity of Christ,
2. the mystery of God as generous love, and
3. the sense of creation as family.

Humanity comes forth from God stamped with an ineradicable image of its Creator,

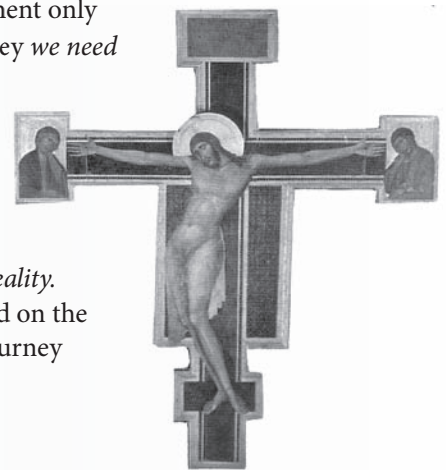
and marked by an unquenchable desire for truth and happiness which will find its fulfillment only in union with God who is both the origin and the goal of this desire. In making the journey *we need a center of orientation*: but because of the historical reality of sin, the center of the world, which must become our personal center, has become lost and hidden from our view . . . But the center has been located for us again *in the incarnation of the Word who is the center of God* and the center through whom God communicates being and grace to the world.

Above all, in the cross of the incarnate Word is revealed the heart of God and the center of reality. It is in our relation to this incarnate and crucified Word that our lives will become focused on the center of reality. *With truth as our guide and love as the animating spirit of our lives*, the journey whereby we make our way back to God will be successful.

Employing a geometrical analogy, Bonaventure explains how the center has been relocated for us in the *humility of the cross*:

For, when the center is lost in the circle, it can be found only by two lines that intersect at a right angle.

St. Bonaventure — *Hexameron*, 1, 24 (V, 333) quoted in *The Hidden Center*. Zachary Hayes OFM, 23-24, 200.



The Christological theme in the writings of Bonaventure and Scotus point to an integral relationship between *Franciscan intellectual tradition* and evangelical life.

According to Michael Blastic OFM the early Franciscan life was “doing theology”.⁴ He draws upon the *Vita Prima* of Thomas of Celano to support the link between theology and life, stating that evangelical life is an integrated life of contemplative action, a life which is theological by definition. Celano’s Franciscan worldview was based on three theological intuitions of Francis:

1. the Christian relation to the world;
2. the meaning of the human Christ; and
3. the nature of the human person.⁵

More recent evidence by Timothy Johnson suggests that Celano’s synthesis may not have been entirely faithful to Francis’ *original* interpretation of the Gospel but rather an effort to create a literary corpus for an increasingly literate community of brothers (trained clerics) whose number was growing.

The focus on written texts caused Francis’ *theological* voice to become marginalized. Francis’ role shifts from interpreter of Gospel life to wonderworker.⁶

It is in the writings of Bonaventure that Francis’ theological intuitions are still evident. Bonaventure developed and interpreted the pattern constructed by Celano and uniquely integrated Francis’ ideas into a rich theological synthesis marked by Christocentricity.

It is in the writings of Bonaventure that an authentic Franciscan intellectual tradition is to be found. Unfortunately Bonaventure’s evangelical synthesis never really took root in the tradition. There was no continued development of an evangelical synthesis after Bonaventure. Rather the *Franciscan*

Whereas Celano based his evangelical theology on the insights of Francis, Bonaventure took Francis as the object of theological reflection from which emerged his synthesis of God, humanity and creation metaphysically grounded in Christ the center. Bonaventure’s synthesis is truly intellectual and yet at the same time Franciscan and evangelical.

intellectual tradition matured as a literary community that gradually moved away from theological reflection on Franciscan life to an emphasis on the interpretation of texts.

The Franciscan School

George Marcil identifies the *Franciscan intellectual tradition* as a “school” rather than a tradition related to the life. He asserts that Anthony of Padua marks the beginning of the school which progresses through the three great intellectual pillars — Bonaventure, Scotus, Ockham and their disciples — and on into the 20th century.

The notion of school further indicates the *Franciscan intellectual tradition* developed within the academy within a textual community and not necessarily in the context of lived experience.

It seems reasonable to conclude therefore that the Franciscan School developed as a tradition within a tradition. It was governed by its own ethos, identity and set of values. The bearers of its tradition became an elite corps of educated friars who hardly represented an Order that had grown

in a variety of ways. As an intellectual school, it gave primacy to texts and remained faithful to the scholastic synthesis.

The intellectual tradition remained apathetic to the changing context of the life itself. This leads to the conclusion that what is called the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition is not a tradition that informs Franciscan life but a school of thought for the educated. Only a few Franciscans know anything about the authentic Franciscan Intellectual Tradition.

It is not an exaggeration to state that contemporary Franciscan life has become shapeless because Franciscan theology has become eclectic, the result of a fragmented evangelical synthesis of theology and lived experience.

At this point it becomes crucial for us to undertake the next steps, which will bring the tradition into dialogue with today’s questions: in regard to Christian faith, the life of the Church, the world of science and culture, and the needs and longings of the human family.

The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: A Working Draft Document. 2001.
Ilia Delio OSF and William Short OFM

An additional factor contributing to the split between Francis theology and Franciscan life was the entrenched Thomism that has governed Roman Catholicism since the 19th century encyclical *Aeterni Patris* which mandated the teaching of Thomas’ theology in all seminaries and Catholic higher education facilities.

By the early 20th century Franciscan life wound up on a tripod: Thomas' theology, Francis' charism and Benedict's monastic structure of life (a structure which Francis himself renounced.).

What originated with Francis and Clare — the synthesis of thought and feeling, content and form, theory and practice expressed in the integration of God, humanity and cosmos — was not only lost but shattered as the intellectual tradition consolidated into a school.

Contemporary Concerns

The idea that the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* has had little or no influence on the contemporary form of Franciscan life became evident at the annual meeting of the provincials of the English Speaking Conference of the Friars Minor (ESC-OFM) in Colorado Springs, CO, 2000. Basic questions concerning the tradition were brought to their attention in discussions concerning

the future of the Order. Three basic questions were raised:

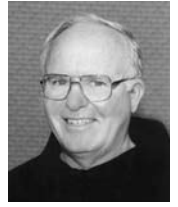
- What is the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*?
- How does it relate to Franciscan life?
- What is its future?

Because the provincials recognized that the meaning and the purpose of the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* was essentially unknown, a task force needed to be established to address these concerns:

1. Identification of the Intellectual Tradition *per se*.
2. Assessment of initial and ongoing formation within the tradition
3. Collaboration between various Franciscan Study Centers
4. Examination of the means and promotion of publications
5. Mobilization of resources for globalization

The work of this committee is ongoing.

Joseph Chinnici OFM, organizer of the task force, has raised a significant voice concerning the integral relationship between the



Franciscan Intellectual Tradition and Franciscan evangelical life. He pointed to a “Copernican shift” in Franciscan identity with the publication of the critical edition of the writings of Francis by **Cajetan Esser OFM** in 1976. Since that time Chinnici writes, “the Franciscan family in the United States has taken a major step in articulating the *distinctiveness* of the Franciscan charism in its evangelical dimension”.⁷

Subsequent to Cajetan's work and that of **Ignatius Brady OFM**, European scholarship on Franciscan identity and life began to flourish, especially among lay scholars. Over the last decade a series of critical studies in Europe have appeared which highlight the place of the Franciscan family and its origins within the context of western European culture and society. Chinnici indicates the significance of the new European scholarship is its focus on the impact of the early Franciscan tradition.

In the 13th century the rise of the tradition had a significant influence on both the church and society. Having emerged out of the experiences of Francis and Clare it manifested itself on the levels of politics, society, economics and culture.

While new translations and commentaries on early Franciscan writings, coupled with the new European scholarship are disclosing the *primitive evangelical synthesis*,



Brother Francis sends greetings to Brother Anthony, my Bishop. I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers providing that, as is contained in the Rule, you ‘do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion’ during study of this kind.

a problem is arising. There is a dwindling of the personnel and social carriers of the tradition's wisdom. Chinnici calls attention to the fact that for the first time in centuries Franciscans have the capacity to renew the tradition and to restore the evangelical synthesis of theology and lived experience. At the same time he acknowledges the problems facing this work of renewal are enormous. In his report to the provincials he cited many concerns. Among them:

1. the consolidation, closure and institutional loss of programs;
2. the loss of control over theological curriculum;
3. the reliance on small centers, isolated from one another;
4. the limitations of economic and personnel resources;
5. the competition among centers for teachers, administrators, students, etc.;
6. the declining number of scholars linguistically capable of working with the original texts.

An Optimistic Future?

The texts and tools to establish new life are at hand, and yet the opportunities to promote scholarship and new scholars are diminishing.

If the intellectual tradition is intended to be at the heart of the life itself, and the resources to sustain the tradition are disappearing, what does this say about the life?

Without appropriate content, the life lacks form; and without form, it lacks meaning and is reduced to a privatized spirituality. *As such it could offer nothing to a world crying out for peace and justice.*

The need now is to reclaim the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* from privatization and the school mentality for it to become an influential power to shape Franciscan life and a public theological voice in a pluralistic world. It is important that the real thrust of contemporary Franciscan theology must come from within the Franciscan family itself.

Chinnici has called for a "domestication" of the tradition, making the theological/philosophical tradition accessible and understandable to the Franciscan family around the English-speaking world. While new collaboration efforts between centers, publishing houses, ongoing formation groups, etc. will be explored, something more basic is needed at the heart of the life itself. It is time to encourage Franciscan communities to become communities of theological reflection, incorporating *core theological values* into their way of life by a process of reflection that will inform new structures of consciousness.

Basic attitudes such as

- *the goodness of God,*
- *the primacy of Christ, and*
- *the dignity of the human person*

must comprise the basis of the worldview of all Franciscan groups.

Conclusion

The *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* is dynamic and alive despite the chaos and uncertainty of the present. The science of chaos teaches that new patterns of order emerge in dissipating systems only when systems are open to new influences. Is the *Franciscan intellectual tradition* a system open to new influence? Can it be changed by new structures of relationship, by new patterns of thinking? Can it function as a SYSTEM, that is, in cooperative relationships among its members?

Margaret Wheatley contends that a system grows and develops as a whole or not at all. In a system each part is something of the whole and parts must function together if meaning is to be generated by a coherent vision and pattern of values.⁸

Can autonomous Franciscan groups work together to create a public voice in the church and world that is a distinctly Franciscan voice?

The meaning of the *Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* is for Franciscans to name and to change. Franciscans are the bearers and the witnesses of this tradition, and those who must live it anew.

The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition cannot be confined to texts but rather must be placed in the context of life. It is a tradition that finds its deepest meaning in the human person and in relationship to the world. It is intended to be a public tradition because it has at its center transformation of the world in Christ.



Those of us who stand heirs to the tradition have a weighty obligation to see that such a Tradition be not lost and that it be brought to bear in our world today. That it should have come to be deposited

with clarity and power in the order that claims the poor, simple man of Assisi as its founder will no doubt puzzle those who tend to limit the meaning of that order in an unhistorical and arbitrary way . . . The order carries as in an earthen vessel a *treasure for the whole of the Church and a heritage for humankind as such.*

Zachary Hayes OFM, "Toward a Philosophy of Education in the Spirit of St. Bonaventure," *Proceedings of the Seventh Centenary Celebration of the Death of Saint Bonaventure* (1974)

End Notes

- ¹ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A.N. Woodrow (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964), 8
- ² Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 5.25.74, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 476
- ³ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism — 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 21
- ⁴ Michael Blastic, "It pleases me that you should teach Sacred Theology: Franciscans doing Theology," *Franciscan Studies*, 55 (1998): 14. See CUSTODIANS #2 (www.franciscantradition.org) and CFIT DVD of Presentation (RuahMedia.org — contact LZMUDA@FSPA.ORG)
- ⁵ Blastic, 2
- ⁶ Timothy Johnson, "Lost in Sacred Space: Textual Hermeneutics, Liturgical Worship and Celano's *Legenda ad usum chori*", 9-15
- ⁷ Joseph P. Chinnici, "North American Stewardship of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition," 5.
- ⁸ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization From an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 1994), 127

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Ilia Delio OSF

Synthesis provided by: Marietta Culhane

Ilia Delio OSF, a Franciscan Sister of Washington DC, holds the Josephine C. Connelly Endowed Chair in Theology at Villanova University. She is the author of seventeen books and numerous articles integrating science, theology and culture. Ilia lectures nationally and internationally on theology in an evolutionary age. Editor of *From Teilhard to Omega: Co-creating an Unfinished Universe*, Ilia's contribution has been expressed "as Teilhard de Chardin did in **The Divine Milieu** she sheds new light on the sacrament of God in the world." Ilia's *Simply Bonaventure* (New City Press NY, 2001) was considered by Joe Chinnici OFM as "very well becoming the **standard English introduction** to his thought for college and graduate school teachers and students."

Among Ilia's Catholic Press Association Book Awards are *Christ in Evolution*, *The Emergent Christ*, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*. The 2015 Orbis book is *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*.

This CUSTODIAN synthesis was provided by **Marietta Culhane OSF**, *Sister of St. Francis of Philadelphia*. Marietta holds an M.A. in English (St. Bonaventure University) and a PhD in Philosophy (Georgetown University). In addition to ministries in teaching and academic administration in both Catholic and state colleges, she has presented numerous lectures and workshops with specialty in Ethics. Marietta served the Archdiocese of Baltimore as mathematics supervisor, team teacher for the Church Leadership Institute, biomedical ethics consultant for Catholic hospitals, and most recently as Pastoral Life Director in the priestless parishes in Western Maryland. She was awarded the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* Papal Medal. 2004

SOURCE of this synthesis: *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*: Washington Theological Union Symposium Papers 2001. Ed: Elise Saggau OSF. CFIT/ESC Series — Number 1. Published by The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, NY (2002) pp. 1-19

ART on page 1: *A Heritage of Wisdom* — G.E.Mullan [Imago Dei - 210 385 8518] gemullen@att.net. Commissioned by the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn for St. Francis College, Brooklyn, NY 1998

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13.

The Humility of God
By Ilia Delio, OSF
(30 minutes)

Crispian's Haecceitas
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Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this project. I hope you will find it helpful and inspiring. I am grateful for your support and for the opportunity to share my thoughts and insights with you.

Ilia Delio OSF
October 2010

An Excess of Love
By Ilia Delio OSF
(30 minutes)

"God finished the ground of this universe and God filled it with life and love. In the beginning, God created the world and filled it with life and love. This is the reason for the Incarnation and the fullness of God's love for us. The love of God is the foundation of our life and the source of our hope. It is the love that makes us human and that gives us the ability to love and be loved. This is the love that makes us one with God and with each other. This is the love that makes us a family and that gives us the strength to face all our challenges. This is the love that makes us a people and that gives us the power to change the world. This is the love that makes us a church and that gives us the ability to bring the world to Christ."

Ilia Delio OSF
October 2010

14.

Trinity
A composite DVD from the teachings of Kenan Osborne OFM, Zachary Hayes OFM, William Short OFM, and Ilia Delio OSF.

The Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith. It is the doctrine that God is one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This DVD explores the mystery of the Trinity and how it is revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. We will see how the Trinity is the source of our life and the foundation of our hope. It is the Trinity that makes us human and that gives us the ability to love and be loved. This is the Trinity that makes us one with God and with each other. This is the Trinity that makes us a family and that gives us the strength to face all our challenges. This is the Trinity that makes us a church and that gives us the ability to bring the world to Christ.

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19.

Incarnation
Composite DVD with five scholars (45 minutes)
By Ilia Delio OSF, Zachary Hayes OFM, Mary Beth Ingham CSJ, William Short OFM, Kenan Osborne OFM

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20.

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General Editor:
Kathleen Moffatt OSF, *Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia*, Aston, PA
moffatt.kathleen@comcast.net

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