

# Custodians of the Tradition

*Reclaiming the Franciscan  
Intellectual Tradition*



**T**hose 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



## Insights for a Value-Centered Life from the Franciscan Tradition

F. Edward Coughlin OFM

The Franciscan spiritual-intellectual tradition offers an “optimistic and positive” understanding of what it means to be human. Its emphasis on the inherent goodness of our common “humanity and fragility” is rooted in Francis’ Admonition V.



*Consider . . . in what great excellence the Lord has placed you, for [God] created you and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His likeness according to the Spirit.*

— St. Francis of Assisi. Admonition 5

### Francis, An Alternative Vision for Living Justly and Loving Rightly

The municipal charter of Assisi of 1210 “elaborated and solemnly proclaimed the new social basis of life in Assisi” that had been worked out by the “city fathers, the lords and the leaders of the people.”<sup>1</sup> While this process was going on, Francis made a number of personal-spiritual choices that would have their own significant social and political implications. For example, Francis chose to embrace, care for, and serve the “poor and the lepers,” those who were “considered to be of little value and looked down upon” by the lords and leaders of Assisi. In a later dramatic and public act, he returned all of the material goods he possessed as the son of Pietro Bernadone to his father. He publicly declared his radical dependence on God, his Father in heaven. In this gesture, Francis turned away from the aspirations and values of his father and of the commune of Assisi.

*Francis found an alternative way of being in the world through his choice to live the Gospel as a lesser brother and to offer a prophetic vision of a fraternal and loving way of relating to others (right relationship/ pietas).*

He discovered how to share the gifts of God's goodness with each person according to his or her *need (iustitiae)*. It was a radically different paradigm from the one proposed in the Assisi charters in the first decade of the thirteenth century.

Franciscan colleges and universities might think of themselves as becoming more committed than ever to creating spaces wherein young adults will have opportunities within a moral community to receive the knowledge, training and experience they need to become good citizens. Here they can learn how spiritual values have a substantive role to play in public life and be invited to cultivate an ethical and moral imagination capable of both envisioning a world in which individuals are respected and where there is a shared sense of the common good.<sup>2</sup>



### Care of the Sick, a Franciscan Ministry

For Francis of Assisi, the years between 1203 and 1206 were an intense period of inner struggle and confusion. As he reported in his Testament, one of his most critical experiences was being led by the Lord among lepers and showing mercy to them. Through such personal encounter, what had been "bitter" to him was changed into "sweetness."<sup>3</sup> Over the course of his short life, Francis experienced a variety of physical sufferings, trials, and tribulations. He was challenged to embrace patiently and humbly his own

humanity and fragility. He struggled to accept what was given to him, and he admonished his followers to do the same for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> He also understood that no suffering, trial or experience has any meaning or value in itself. Meaning can be found in suffering only if one identifies oneself with the suffering of the Crucified One and opens oneself to God's self-revelation as love in the very midst of limitation, weakness and fragility.<sup>5</sup> And, when the time came, Francis joyfully welcomed "Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape," as he lay naked on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

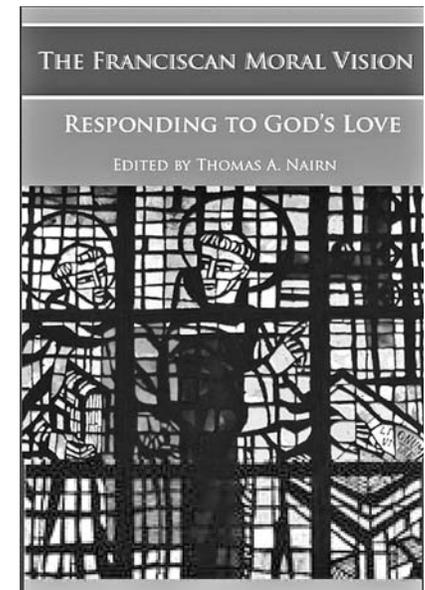
There is today an urgent need for Catholic ethicists and moral theologians to exercise leadership and to become active participants in creating spaces for ethical discernment. Both ordinary folk and medical professionals need opportunities to better understand the questions, the ethical issues and the moral obligations that challenge every person to make loving choices even in the most difficult of circumstances. As Thomas Shannon reminds us in a recent article in *Theological Studies*:

Beginning in the late 15th century, Catholic moral theologians have thoughtfully reflected on the circumstances under which the obligation to preserve life is binding and which interventions, therefore, are obligatory. That reflection has continued up into our own time with continual refinements of the tradition in light of developments within contemporary medicine.<sup>7</sup>

The Catholic moral tradition has the potential to make a significant contribution towards understanding the issues better and suggests how ordinary well as medical professionals might make good decisions. This potential will be realized, however, only in the measure that the Catholic

community is willing to play a meaningful role in two areas:

- we must create places where significant conversations might take place in the context of the wisdom of a theological-spiritual tradition.
- we must educate and form men and women within a perspective that prepares them to think ethically and act morally in both ordinary and extraordinary moments of human experience.



This enormous task requires attention across the life span, but I suggest that Catholic colleges and universities are the most obvious and critical places to initiate ethical and moral education.

### The Franciscan Contribution to the Ethical-Moral Education and Formation of Young Adults in the Twenty-first Century

For almost twenty-years now, Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ has argued that the ethical method of the medieval Franciscan John Duns Scotus provides an approach to understanding moral goodness that offers a truly human paradigm for moral decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

*Can we be a prophetic and counter-cultural voice in the face of a secularized, technologically advanced world that progresses at the expense of the most vulnerable?*

*Can we work to change not just the structures of injustice but also the **structures of thinking** that support and justify the injustice?*

*In his intellectual and spiritual vision of reality, Scotus may offer the resources of the Franciscan and Christian tradition to address in a coherent way the needs of all. His thought may be another support for rebuilding not just the Church but also an entire society, indeed, the entire world.*

Mary Beth Ingham CSJ. "Birthing of a New Vision of the Human" in *Scotus for Dunces* (2003)

It more than responds to the current need to critique a range of moral philosophies being advocated by various authors and groups. More importantly, it is an approach to ethical-moral decision-making that is both

1. attentive to principles and
2. concerned with the particulars in a given situation.

It also takes into account the human reality of the person deciding. It is a method that challenges persons to integrate, "in whatever way they are best able," "all of the conditions necessary for an act to be whole and complete."<sup>9</sup>



First, Ingham argues in several places that the Franciscan spiritual-intellectual tradition offers an "optimistic and positive" understanding of what it means to be human. Its emphasis on the inherent goodness of our com-

mon "humanity and fragility" is rooted in Francis' Admonition V wherein he challenges every man and woman to consider . . . in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for [God] created you and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His likeness according to the Spirit.

*Admonition Five contains in embryo the Christocentric vision of the Franciscan School. It is one of the most profound and far-reaching insights of Francis. The universe and all creatures reflect God, speak of God, reveal God's goodness because they are all made according to a pattern, the model of God's own heart, the core of the Trinity, the word.*

William Short OFM

This Admonition challenges us to be open to and respectful of our embodied state. It

1. **invites** us to grapple with the ultimate significance of our having been made in the image of God.

It also

2. **demand**s that we stand open to the wisdom that different academic disciplines offer with respect to grasping better the beauty, complexity and, yes, even the limits of our having been made human. The struggle to understand the human condition also necessarily requires a fundamental openness to the spiritual dimension of our humanity and the potential contribution of the discipline of theology in particular.

Finally, as Bonaventure put it, the Admonition

3. **invites** us to understand that "God made the soul rational, namely, that of its own accord, it might praise God, serve God, find delight in God, and be at rest [in God]."<sup>10</sup> In other words, our created human nature disposes us to become good, to learn to love rightly and to serve generously.

Admonition V becomes even more significant in light of John Duns Scotus' philosophical principle of *haecceitas*.

This principle postulates that each person is unique and wanted by God as a singular, unrepeatable individual.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, the Admonition and the principle of *haecceitas* provide a firm foundation for understanding the essential goodness and value of our shared humanity as well as the inherent dignity and absolute value of each person.



The late thirteenth-century Franciscan philosopher/theologian, John Duns Scotus, added a further insight into the significance of the inherent goodness and dignity of every human being when he articulated the principle of *Haecceitas* or “Thisness.” This principle holds that, beyond the fundamental dignity and goodness of every human person, there is something absolutely unique and unrepeatable; the individual is “this” person, unlike any other person before or after him or her.

As the twentieth-century Franciscan scholar Allan Wolter explains, the principle of “Thisness” would seem to invest each [human person] with a unique value as one singularly wanted and loved by God, quite apart from any trait that person shares with others or any contribution he or she might make to society. One can even say, *haecceity* is our personal gift from God.

Allan Wolter, *Duns Scotus' Early Oxford Lecture on Individuation*, Introduction (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002), xxi



## An Ethical Method

In his ethical method, Scotus values three unique sources of wisdom within our created human nature.

The sources include:

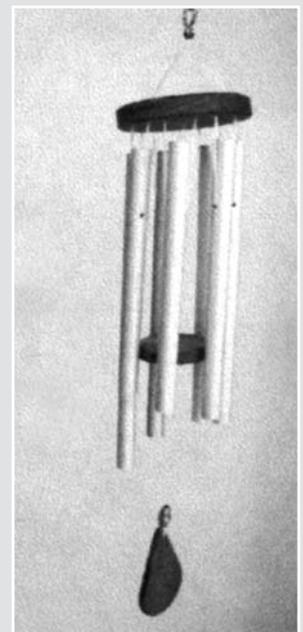
1. human reason,
2. the will's aspirations for the good, and
3. the will's freedom with respect to choice.

For Scotus, the ideal would be for the moral person to bring all of them into a harmonious and mutual relationship as much as one is able to do so in a particular situation.

*I suggest the wind chime as an image of Scotus moral discussion. The chime must exhibit balance of all elements . . . Every chime requires a center disk which is sufficiently weighed to hang appropriately yet sufficiently light to be moved by the wind. The **will** is such a central element, weighted by its two affections for **justice** and for **possession**, yet free enough to move toward the surrounding pieces. . . . Like the chime, the morally good act exhibits a visual and a moral beauty. . . . The activity of proper moral decision-making is made possible by the balance already within the will and present in the order which surrounds it. . . .*

*Together, the human goods of balance and harmony constitute that inner peace which gives rise to joy within the heart of the formed moral agent. . . . Within the will, **the two affections** are held in a balance appropriate to the object of loving. This balance is necessary so that the **affection for justice** can succeed in directing the **affection for possession**.*

Mary Beth Ingham CSJ. *The Harmony of Goodness: Mutuality and Moral Living According to John Duns Scotus*.



*A moral act might, therefore, be best understood as “an act of right loving, which requires not only mutuality of balance between the affections, but also mutual interaction of intellection and willing.”<sup>14</sup>*

Scotus’ ethical method also encourages us to create learning environments that help students develop their capacity to be open to and understand the deepest movements of the heart — *the affection for justice and the affection for possession*. The affections are “dispositions for loving.”<sup>12</sup>

Anselm described these in the eleventh century, and Scotus later extended this consideration. Understanding the affections provides a way to grasp “the restlessness of the human heart, so beautifully expressed by Augustine” in his Confessions.<sup>13</sup>

A person who is reflectively aware and appropriately self-conscious can learn, over time and through experience, to recognize the movements of the affections as well as to measure the inner tension that might exist between them in terms of the good being sought. Thus, in a practical and personal way, the affections invite the person to understand better the demands of loving justly and rightly, as God loves.

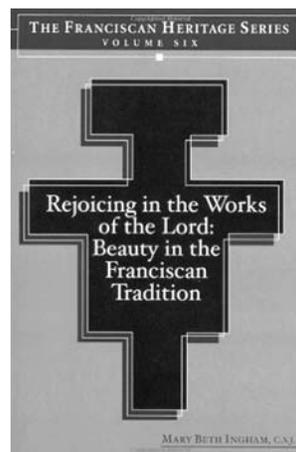
The struggle to be aware of and to bring the two affections into a greater measure of harmony and balance is, therefore, a critical dimension of the education and formation of persons on their journeys to becoming fully human and morally good.

Therefore, Scotus’ thinking would support us in creating a learning environment that assists and encourages our students to understand better and use wisely their freedom with respect to choice — i.e., the will. Freedom of the will is one of the most distinctive features of Scotus’ thought in that it is the principle of all action, that is, right-willing, ordered-loving, justice.

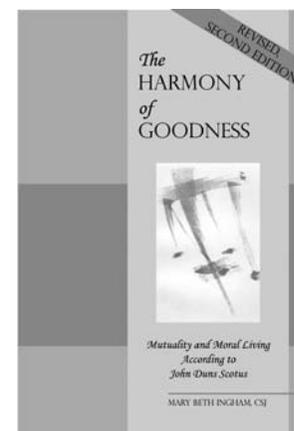


## Conclusion

Briefly stated, within the will there lies the human potential to choose something/someone, to reject someone/something, or to refrain from choosing, that is, to be self-controlling, self-determining, self-restraining in the act of choosing. It is in the domain of the third possibility, the choice to be self-controlled, that true freedom is to be found.<sup>15</sup>



It is here that persons not only decide what they will do but, more importantly, what kind of persons they want to become and what core values will define their lives. Also, at the moment of choice, persons may accept or reject the counsel of prudence. Finally, in the moment of choice, individuals are free to decide how they intend to act, how and to what degree they intend to love. We have a sense, then, of the Franciscan tradition’s understanding of the inherent goodness of the human person and the human qualities most needed for ethical-moral living. We now begin to appreciate the rich variety of ways an integrated approach to educating the whole person within the Catholic-Franciscan tradition might be actualized in a post-secular university. Our tradition suggests an education that is as broad and deep as it is intentional in providing students with the kind of formative knowledge and experience that will prepare them for life in a complex and rapidly changing world. Thus prepared, they will be able to make choices that will ultimately reveal their intentions to serve generously and to love rightly.



## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> David Flood, "Franciscans at Work," *Franciscan Studies* 59 (2001): 21. For more on the situation in Assisi at the time of Francis see David Flood, *Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Movement* (Quezon City, Philippines: FIA Contact Publications, 1989), esp. 1-43, 70-77.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, "Moral Decision-Making as Discernment: Scotus and Prudence," in *Moral Action in a Complex World: Franciscan Perspectives*, [Washington Theological Union Symposium Papers](#) (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications).
- <sup>3</sup> Francis of Assisi, Testament, 1-3, FA: ED I, 124.
- <sup>4</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Earlier Rule X*, FA:ED I, 71-72, *The Later Rule*, VI:9, FA:ED I, 103, *Letter to a Minister*, 1-8 FA:ED I, 97, and *Admonitions XIII, XV, XVIII*, FA:ED I, 133, 134, 134.
- <sup>5</sup> Xavier Seubert, OFM, "The Cross and the Death of Jesus," in *Solitude and Dialogue: Contemporary Franciscans Theologize*, ed. A. Carrozzo, OFM (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2000), 155-169, esp. 165-166. For more on the nature of suffering, see Thomas Merton, "The Word of the Cross," in *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harvest Books, Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 79-95.
- <sup>6</sup> Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Creatures*, 12, FA: ED I, 114. For a description of Francis' death, see Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of St. Francis*, XIV, FA: ED II, 640-44.
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas Shannon, "'Unbind Him and Let Him Go' (Jn 11:44): Ethical Issues in the Determination of Proportionate and Disproportionate Treatment," *Theological Studies* 69.4 (December, 2008): 899. In this article, Shannon affirms what he believes to be the rich and long established resources and methodology within the Catholic tradition for participating in these discussions while at the same time noting some of the ways in which some individuals within the Church today seem to be attempting to reframe the discussion.
- <sup>8</sup> Ingham, "Moral Decision-Making as Discernment," 123. I am deeply indebted to the foundational work of Allan Wolter, OFM, the writings of Thomas Shannon, and most especially the work of Mary Beth Ingham for my limited knowledge of Scotus' ethical method.
- <sup>9</sup> Ingham, "Moral Decision-Making as Discernment," 125.
- <sup>10</sup> Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, n. 14, trans. Zachary Hayes (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1996), 51-52. See also the commentary 26-27.



- <sup>11</sup> See Edward Coughlin, OFM, "On the Significance of Being You," *The Cord*, 53.6 (2003): 316-20. The cited section of this article attempts a brief summary of Scotus' thought and includes numerous references for further study.
- <sup>12</sup> Mary Beth Ingham, *The Harmony of Goodness: Mutuality and Moral Living according to Scotus* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1996), 34.
- <sup>13</sup> See Shannon and Ingham, *The Ethical Method of John Duns Scotus*, 65.
- <sup>14</sup> Shannon and Ingham, *The Ethical Method of John Duns Scotus*, 70.
- <sup>15</sup> Ingham, "Moral Decision-Making as Discernment: Scotus on Prudence," 135.

## Source

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See also: CFIT DVD clip, *On Living a Life Dedicated to Generosity and Presence*.

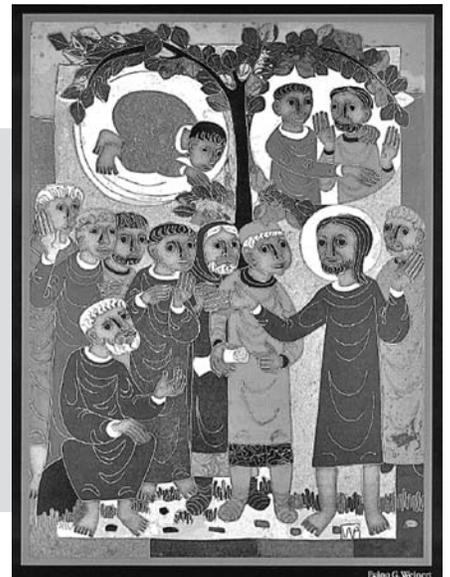
Available from [RuahMedia.org](http://RuahMedia.org). [Lzmuda@fspa.org](mailto:Lzmuda@fspa.org)

Art episodes from Bardi Dossal, 1245 — Santa Croce, Florence, Italy.

*"You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well."*

Matthew 22, 34-40

*Gospels by Eginio G. Weinert, Cologne, Germany. [www.eginoweinert.de](http://www.eginoweinert.de)*



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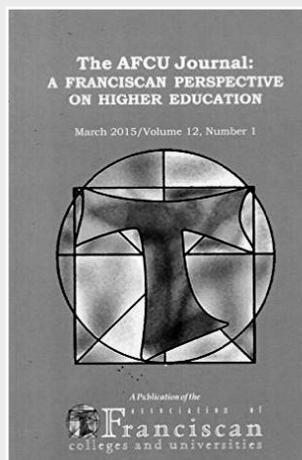
F. Edward Coughlin OFM

Synthesis provided by: Roberta A. McKelvie OSF

**F. Edward Coughlin OFM** is the President of Siena College, Loudonville NY. He brings to Siena remarkable leadership experience, long-standing commitment to intellectual, ethical and spiritual formation and passion for finding new ways to make the 800 year-old Franciscan tradition come alive on a 21st century college campus.

Ed Coughlin has twice been the director of St. Bonaventure's **Franciscan Institute** where he oversaw the research program's academic course offerings and extensive publications. He has been a member of the Institute's summer faculty since 1984. His signature course is "The Franciscan Person."

With conviction and a gift for collaboration, Ed enabled the initiation of the OFM Commission for the retrieval of the Franciscan Intellectual Life (CFIT) as well as facilitating its many projects, most recently the Colorado Springs Forum on *The Franciscan Moral Vision*. He has also been keynote speaker for the Franciscan Federation TOR and the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (AFCU). Together with at least 20 articles, Ed is author of Volume 10 *Introductions to the Spiritual Writings of St. Bonaventure* of the esteemed **Bonaventure Series** published by the Franciscan Institute.



This CUSTODIAN synthesis was provided by **Roberta A. McKelvie OSF**, a Bernardine Franciscan Sister, Reading, PA. Roberta ministers at Alvernia University as Special Assistant to the President for Mission Integration. Previously Roberta served in congregational leadership; as managing editor of Franciscan Institute Publications and editor of *The Cord*. Her seminal work on Angelina of Montegiove, the prototype of Third Order Regular women's beguine/ community life, as well as other writings, have made significant contributions to the Franciscan Family.



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