

# 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



## Give an Account of the Hope That Is Within You

By William J. Short OFM

**“Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is within you with gentleness and respect.”**

I Peter 3:15

“To give an account of the hope that is within us” is our challenge. As Franciscans, we have hope within us, within the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual tradition.

*We have a hopeful word that will speak to today’s Church and society. People are seeking an alternate language, an alternate way of looking at the human person, the meaning of the Church, who God is, what Christ represents and the meaning of salvation and creation. Franciscans have a word of hope to speak to these questions. We hold a family treasure that needs to be rediscovered and shared with those who seek.*

We must “get this word out.” But to do so requires intelligent analysis of the signs of the times as well as effort and dedication in living out its implications.

To illustrate what this can look like in practice, let’s start with a story about “finding a language” — articulating something that was already being done, and its effect on an institution.

### Story of FST Mission Statement

When I was serving as President of the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, we were being visited for our ten-year accreditation. As the visit was coming to an end, a member of the Visiting Team asked a rather innocuous question, “Don’t you wish you were a bigger school, with a large endowment, with your pick of the best students applying to schools on a national level?”

Without even thinking about it, I said, “No, I don’t think so.”

This bewildered him, but the visitor saw that the Board members who were present were nodding in agreement. “That seems a strange answer,” said the visitor, “could you explain why not?”

I explained that for Franciscans being “lesser” was something good. We know we are not Harvard or Yale, and would never want to be. Our experience of poverty in not having the security of an endowment was okay, because it made us depend on each other more, and that was something good. We regularly accepted students who would not have a chance in a big school, who were marginal because of their social, economic or cultural background. We felt happy to serve them. We wanted a mix of men and woman, lay and religious, candidates for ordination and those preparing for lay ministry. All this was a good “fit” with our Franciscan identity. The way that the school operated flowed from a clear, inner sense of identity.

The chair of the team challenged us by saying, “Your mission statement doesn’t say that at all!” “No,” I said, “if it did it wouldn’t look like a mission statement.” (Like many institutions, our mission statement was phrases copied from other schools’ mission statements, saying things like “We believe in creating a learning environment,” etc.). The team chair then ordered me, “Right now, go and write down as accurately as possible, what you just told us. That is your mission!”

Thus began a long process of circulating a text that eventually became our Mission Statement.



“Giving an account” of the hope within us means we move from an inchoate, unspoken, intuitive grasp of “what fits” for us as Franciscans to an articulated, explicit description that others can grasp, question and appropriate. Our task is not to make others accept our vision, but simply to make it available to them as a viable choice.

*We must learn our tradition carefully and deeply and then find the language in which to express it, making it available to a broad public accurately and simply.*

## “But what IS the Franciscan tradition?”

This question has challenged all Franciscans because we do not know our own tradition. We feel that the Franciscan tradition holds great promise for today’s Church and contemporary world, but we are at a loss for words. As Franciscan religious communities decrease in numbers and ministerial demands increase, we risk failing to pass on our tradition to those who will carry it into this next century.

What follows are a few examples of approaches to important questions which face the Church and world today, to which the Franciscan tradition suggests approaches and insights that can be used to address some contemporary issues.

## God

Christian religious language about God in the United States whether Catholic or Protestant is strongly influenced by monistic or Unitarian viewpoints. God is understood to be like an individual who is a distant, static being who made the world, leaving it as a testing place for those who are pre-destined. The supremacy of the individual finds its roots in the understanding of God — sameness, identity, uniformity — these are the godly characteristics. Difference, dialogue and diversity become “ungodly” words.

In contrast, the Franciscan tradition understands a more complex, interesting and lively image of God. God is Trinitarian — tri-personal, communal, interactive. God is primarily a community of persons in



Eginio Weinert *Trinity*

the give and take of an inter-relationship. Unity does not suppress identity, but enriches it. In this view, diversity is enriching, dialogue essential to being, and difference is divine.

How does the Franciscan understanding of God speak to our notion of society? What would it mean to model human inter-relationship on a communion of persons in unity? How can this speak to those who cannot accept a distant, alienated, monolithic theism?

## Christ

The predominant Catholic and Protestant understanding of Christ is that of Savior, whose suffering and death cancel the effects of Adam’s sin. According to this view, Christ came because Adam sinned. Human sin is the very core of the universe because it demanded the coming of Christ to remedy its damage. This view can be called, “hamartiocentric” (sin-centered).

Our relationship with God is primarily that of sinners to the All-Just-One. The task of human life is to fight sin, pray to be freed from it, and examine our lives

(and other’s) for sin. The human person is defined in terms of being a “sinful creature” who must be “saved from sin.” Christ is important because he primarily saves us from sin.

The Franciscan view is not hamartiocentric, but Christocentric. Christ, not sin, is at the center of the inter-relationship between God, the world and humanity. The 14th century philosopher-theologian, John Duns Scotus was asked, “Would Christ have come if Adam had not sinned?” Contrary to the predominant thinking of the Christian theological tradition, Scotus answered, “Yes.” Christ came not simply as a remedy for sinfulness, but as an expression of the divine Trinitarian communion, overflowing in generosity and sharing ever greater life with others. The focus changes from “fighting sin” to “giving life.”

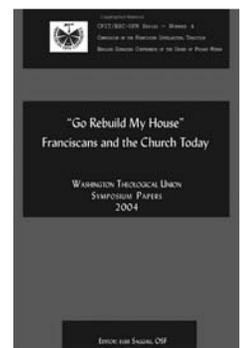
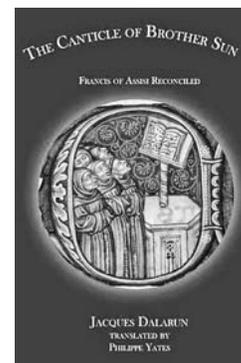
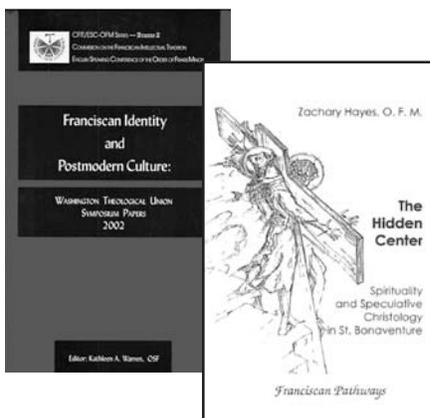
## Human Person as Divine Image

Francis wrote this about the dignity of the human person:

*Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord placed you: he created and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body, and to His likeness according to the spirit.*

[Admonition V, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents (FA:ED) I*, (New York, London, Manila: New City Press, 1999), 131.]

This saying, from Francis’ Admonitions, points to the great dignity of every human person as a living “icon” of Christ, the image of God. The human person is the living icon or image of Jesus, the beloved Son of God. Just as we approach images of Jesus with loving reverence, so we approach those whom the Lord sends to us.



What “word” can this reverent attitude speak to the human sciences? Can anthropology be religiously significant? Does psychology present us with matter for theological reflection? Can sociology become a partner in the exploration of Christology?

## Generosity, the Poverty of God

*Let us refer all good to the Lord God Almighty and Most High, acknowledge that every good is his and thank Him, from Whom all good comes, for everything.*

[Francis of Assisi, Earlier Rule, XVII, in FA:ED I, 76]

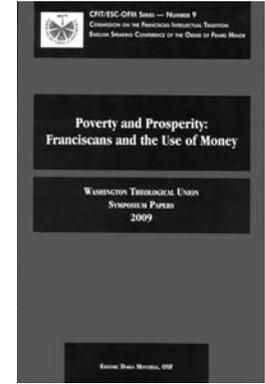
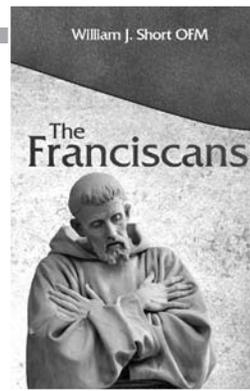
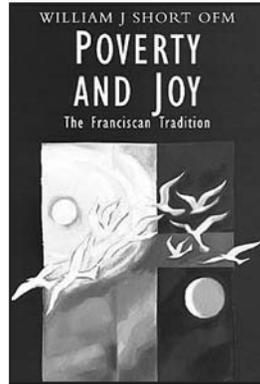
The exhortation expresses Francis’ profound insight that **everything is gift**. God has given everything, and gives everything generously. We live as images of God when we recognize that everything is God’s, not ours, including our own lives, talents, health, money, intelligence, family, friends, and work. All really belongs to God and our task is to be grateful to God for his generous gifts, and show thanks in being generous to others. In this way we express who we really are: we are like God when we share what we have been given.

What “word” do Franciscans have to speak to economic-liberalism and the increasing globalization of the world economy? How can we engage in discussions on the right to private property, welfare reform, and forgiveness of international debt? How do we form the institutions with which we invest our money in the image of God?

## All Creation in the Incarnate Word

Reverence for each person is based on an idea of great, fundamental equality: we consider others as brothers and sisters. But who we call our brothers and sisters goes beyond what we may imagine. In the Canticle of Creatures Francis expressed an equality that went beyond the human race to include every creature under heaven; from fire and water to grass and flowers: each were brother and sister to him.

The Franciscan Tradition takes seriously the gospel passage that all was made through the Word, all was created for the Word and all were created in the Word



(John 1). The Divine Word, Christ, took on the physical matter of the universe. When we meditate on this Word “through Whom all things were made,” we see the material world as a place of encounter with the Incarnate Word.

This has vast implications for the sciences. Physics, astronomy, biology, botany, zoology have profound religious ramifications, revealing the face of God. The dichotomies of faith and reason, religion and science, cannot be sustained when we consider all matter as linked, by the very fact of its existence, to Christ the Word. To put it simply, for Franciscans, “Matter matters.”

## Church

The “Franciscan phenomenon” took the Church of the 13th century by surprise. Here was a group of men and women, lay and ordained, educated and uneducated and from different social backgrounds. They modeled themselves on the disciples in the life of the itinerant Jesus rather than the proven monastic life of structured prayer and hierarchical relationships. They followed no rule approved by the Church, but claimed to follow the “holy Gospel” as their rule. When the Church leadership asked Francis and Clare to accept an older, more established form of life, **they humbly and obediently refused**.

Problems ensued. When the friars arrived in Paris to study and teach, the theological establishment could not figure them out. Who are these people? Who is their bishop? What is their parish? What people are entrusted to their care? Their itinerant, international discipleship model of evangelical life clashed with the reality of the local, diocesan and parochial church. The Franciscans presented an appealing model of Church that transcended traditional categories, a kind of “evangelical globalization.”

Today, many people fail to find a place at a local parish or in a diocesan structure. Since this is their only frame of reference, they feel they must choose between uncomfortable staying or leaving the Church altogether. Who has ever presented to them a viable, approved, thoroughly orthodox alternative to the “parochial church?” The Franciscan movement offers a gift to those who are “not yet” or “no longer” members of the Church.

## Ministry and Authority

*“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. And 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.”*

[Admonition IV in FA:ED I, 130]

The Lord Jesus, on the night before he died, washed the feet of his disciples. Francis asked that this passage from John’s gospel be read as he was dying. Clare re-enacted this gesture when she would wash the feet of the sisters when they returned to the convent of San Damiano after walking the dirty streets of Assisi. Both Francis and Clare identify themselves as servants, in the manner of John’s gospel and enshrined in the liturgy of Holy Thursday.

Francis and Clare point out to us the great revelation of the divinity of Christ as servant. **Here is a truly subversive image of God**, one that is quite unexpected, looking more like the work of a hospital attendant, a parent washing a dirty child or all the invisible men and women who

work at the local car wash or vacuum the boarding lounge at the airport.

This picture of “the humility of God” is one we enact when we put aside status, rank and power to “become lesser” and thus reveal our own likeness to God.

What “word” can this speak to our approach to ministry and mission in our communities? How would the understanding of priesthood be shaped by a model which follows the gospel account in John of the washing of feet? A model of priesthood based on the Synoptic Gospels, with the exclusive focus on Jesus’ giving bread and wine as His body and blood, is probably most familiar to us. What “word” can we speak with a model of priesthood *characterized by the washing of feet?*

## Conclusion

During a visit with the Apache people at Whiteriver, Arizona, our novices learned of the real concern among older people that the young were at risk of losing their native language. The influence of the English-speaking culture, the values of the media, all threaten the survival of the ancient Apache language and culture. The tribe has inaugurated a cultural center designed to help its young discover the beauty and power of their traditions.

I have suggested a few areas in which our Franciscan tradition offers the possibility of speaking a “new” language in today’s Church and society. Like the White Mountain Apaches, we face the erosion of our Franciscan culture and language today. We experience the pressure of the surrounding society, both civil and ecclesiastical, that most often speaks a dominant language that we slowly internalize. We may be the last speakers of the Franciscan language.



*Let us take advantage of this graced moment to learn our language and teach it to a new generation, both inside and outside our Franciscan communities. We must “give an account of the hope that is within us with gentleness and patience.”*

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By William J. Short OFM

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SEE ALSO: CUSTODIANS of the Tradition: Reclaiming the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition. [www.franciscantradition.org](http://www.franciscantradition.org), *A Franciscan Language for the 21st Century* by William Short OFM.

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