

# 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



## Francis of Assisi: Return to the Gospel

By Eloi Leclerc OFM

### Epilogue: The Encounter between the Gospel and History

In the heart of this young man there took place an extraordinary confrontation between the demands of the Good News and the deepest urgings of his times.

*Charism is a divinely bestowed gift granted to a person or persons for the purpose of renewing God's covenant with humanity during those times when societies have become indifferent to and/or forgetful of their responsibility to this covenant. Francis' passionate resonance with God's presence in the Word of the Gospel was such a gift.*



"Someone who drags us  
away from beaten paths"

Eloi Leclerc, in his book *Francis of Assisi: Return to the Gospel*, describes the historical period into which Francis was born as one in which humanity, coping with complex changes, had become forgetful of its covenant with God. He describes Francis' ability to discern these critical changes through the lens of the Gospel and call people to required conversion as his unique contribution to history. Leclerc reminds us that this gift today — eight centuries later — "still possesses a potential for renewal and rejuvenation." (135) Can the vibrant creativity with which Francis lived his original evangelical experience — his radical walking in the footprints of Jesus — be retrieved today?

Leclerc believes that Francis' evangelical experience can be replicated today by persons who remain attuned at one and the same time to their historical milieu and the message of the Gospel. He maintains that three conditions contributed to fueling Francis' creativity and sustaining its commanding blaze:

1. Francis' richly endowed nature,
2. his ability to internalize the Gospel message, and
3. the historical context in which he lived.

Even the most elementary familiarity with Francis' inherent giftedness renders this first condition irrefutable. But Leclerc probes the core of Francis' nature by citing Louis Lavelle as follows:

*"Perhaps there has never been a more wide-awake consciousness than that of Francis, a more spontaneous responsiveness, more delicate or more quick to perceive all the impulses coming from nature, from other beings and from God"*

(*Quatre Saints*, Paris, 1962, p. 89).

*"All the resources of Francis' nature sprang into action under God's hand. . . ."*

Invigorated by this "wide-awake consciousness" Francis interacted with the words of scripture. Leclerc writes: "All the resources of Francis' nature sprang into action under God's hand, his affective potential, his esthetic sense, and his lyric creativeness." (136) Francis was gifted with the keen ability to connect with others — human, animate, inanimate objects — making possible spirited collaboration with the uniqueness of the other. We read:

[Francis'] conversion was . . . essentially the act of entering into contact with a living person, Jesus Christ. When he attached himself to that unique and transcendent Person, Francis' faculties were freed from what was still too narrow in them. The natural receptivity of his mind and heart dilated till he embraced the entire world. The kiss he gave the leper is the most beautiful symbol of this openness. (136)

For multiple reasons which Leclerc references throughout his book, and summarizes in this Epilogue, the people of Francis' day were economically, physically, psychologically and spiritually starved. They responded to his life-energizing qualities as arid soil responds to nourishing rain after prolonged drought.

**"one of these exceptional encounters between the Gospel and history"**



*Path of Peace*

This was not simply another ordinary moment in history. This moment held within it the vibrancy of a deliberate God-moment, as it were, precisely directed by the Spirit in which the unique personality and evangelical, or Gospel, experience of Francis intersected with the desperate need of God's spiritually starved people, thereby delivering "the Church from her sociological straitjacket and open[ing] before her a new future and a new youth. The Franciscan miracle was born of these exceptional encounters between the Gospel and history." (137) Leclerc believes that Francis, or the Franciscan miracle, caught on because

Francis encountered the Gospel on the path followed by human history. . . . He read [the Gospel] as a man who felt within himself the seething passions of his epoch, and who was carried along by the tidal wave of a human movement welling up from the depths of society. Francis read the Gospel with new eyes, in the light of the major aspirations of his time.

What gives to the Franciscan Gospel experience its true dimension and its seductive power is precisely this combination of the Gospel with

the deepest aspirations of man, and the encounter between the message preached by Jesus and the creative forces of history. . . . The Gospel became life and light in this man because in him it came into contact with all the vital forces he bore within himself, and which were those of his times. . . .

. . . To [Francis], God appeared as mysteriously present in our history, bereft of all the trappings of power, bound instead to what was weakest and most despised in man's world. Francis rediscovered God's humbleness, God's humanity. Not merely as an object of devotion, but as a new principle on which to reconstruct society. He understood that if one acknowledges the God of the Gospel, then one can no longer be satisfied with just any form of social organization. (viii-ix)

**"Society was again split apart."**

In Francis' day the feudal underpinnings of society which held it together for several centuries were nearing complete collapse. The feudal estates along with the nobility that governed these were crumbling. Serfs, whose livelihood had been tied to these estates, now roamed the countryside without the protection once insured through their bondage. Money economy, a merchant culture and towns were emerging. The desire for association embedded in the heart of humanity began taking shape in the new communes. The dark side of this reality however was another reality — aggressive and often ruthless accumulation of power and wealth by the advantaged few while the less advantaged fell victim of the powerful. Leclerc states: "Society was again split apart. A new feudalism made its appearance, the feudalism of money, bringing with it new forms of oppression. . . . Himself a product of this urban and mercantile milieu, [Francis] the son of Pietro Bernardone experienced within himself the seething ebullition of his time. He shared its aspirations, ambitions, and passions." (138) But God held sway.

*"In the heart of this young man there took place an extraordinary confrontation between the demands of the Good News and the deepest urgings of his time." (138)*

**Francis "who read the Gospel with the concerns of his times in mind, created something new. . . ."**



*Clothed in Splendor*

Two well-known encounters with Jesus, i.e. the message Francis heard as he prayed before the crucifix in the run-down church of San Damiano and his encounter with a leper along the roadside outside Assisi, fanned into vibrant flame the spark of God already present in Francis' heart. "He kept searching and praying," says Leclerc, "and finally heard the Gospel message, not just with his ears but with his whole being. That was the decisive moment. In the heart of this young man there took place an extraordinary confrontation between the demands of the Good News and the deepest urgings of his times." (138) Francis never lost focus. Nor did he go about searching for people to join him. They came to him and asked to walk with him. Bernard, Peter, Giles, and then Clare, Catherine, and married couples like Luchesio and Buondonna, ordained clerics like Sylvester etc. The conditions for doing so were the same Jesus offered to those who wished to follow him. Sell what you have, including any status or prestige you may have acquired to date, give your possessions to the poor — and live according to the Gospel.

In so doing, and responsive to the charism entrusted to him, Francis effectively called people of his day to renew their faithfulness to their covenant with God by sharing with them a fresh reading of the Gospel.

*Thus, in the heart of a Church which had remained feudal and hierarchical in its mode of government and in its manner of approaching men, this son of the commune who read the Gospel with the concerns of his times in mind, created something new; he invented a form of community life where there existed no positions of dominance nor any sort of precedence. In short, he created brotherhood. (139) — universal fraternity inclusive of all of God's creation.*

Probing this more deeply, one observes Francis incorporating the concept of “association” that the communes sought, but failed to achieve, into a new fraternity which excluded craving for wealth, power and/or prestige in any form. These were the qualities that fractured the new social structures causing divisiveness antithetical to the harmony of God's creation — both human and non-human. This is illustrated in a story recorded in the *Legend of Three Companions*. Here we are told that when, becoming aware that the brothers renounced their possessions, Bishop Guido of Assisi expressed his concern for their wellbeing. How could they sustain themselves? Francis reportedly replied, “My Lord, if we had any possessions we should also be forced to have arms to protect them, since possessions are a cause of disputes and strife, and in many ways we should be hindered from loving God and our neighbor. Therefore in this life we wish to have no temporal possessions” (L3C 35). Leclerc adds: “Here poverty is placed at the service of brotherhood.

*What matters above all is the relationship between persons.*

On this level we find Francis' true originality, which consists entirely in bringing out a certain quality of this relationship, a new quality where the spirit of association that had characterized early communes is found once more, enlightened and amplified by the Gospel.” (139)

**“God has left behind his regal throne . . . and become our brother.”**

Having said this, however, Leclerc cautions that as Francis read the Gospel through the lens of his historical period he was doing so with his keen awareness of the humility and poverty of a transcendent God who chose to become incarnated in humanity and its history. This led Francis “to a wonder-filled discovery: that of the mystery of the Incarnation. . . . God has left behind his regal throne;

*. . . He walked in our midst bereft of every sign of power, as the humblest and meanest of all. Francis discovered the humanness of God, the humility of God. The God of majesty himself has become our brother.” (140)*



While never losing sight of God's transcendence, this is, for Francis, “not transcendence of domination but of communion. It is the transcendence of a Love which overwhelms us and disrupts all our petty categories. It is the transcendence of a God who goes so far as to embrace the poorest and humblest human condition, to walk among us so as to bring into human history a new principle for society.” (140) Francis, at the same time extraordinarily God-graced and instinctively human, was able to experience as one truth, as it were, the humility of our transcendent God in the context of human history. This came about, Leclerc maintains, “through the action of an exceptional moral personality who, filled with the perceptions of his times, came back to the Gospel and succeeded in reconciling the ancient institution of the Church with the youth of the world.” (141)

One can suggest that Francis' enduring credibility is rooted in his ability to move seamlessly between his acute experience of God as transcendent, and at the same time passionately involved in human history. When writing of the Eucharist in a letter to his brothers Francis reflects: “O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread” (LtOrd 27).

Fully in touch with the needs of the people of his historical period Francis spoke to them about their transcendent God who became their brother in Jesus. He reminded them: “Consider . . . in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His likeness according to the Spirit” (Adm 5.1). Gradually people who had been beaten down by civil and ecclesial power became aware of the spark of divinity planted deep within their being and, with the new awareness of their own true dignity, created loving communities with each other in response to the preaching of Francis and his companions. A remarkable epitaph of the way Francis touched the hearts of downtrodden people is chiseled into a concrete memorial in the little hill town of Poggio Bustone in Italy. It reads “*Buon giorno, buona gente*” recalling the morning centuries ago when, with these words, Francis greeted people who had no experience of having ever been called “good.” To this day on the morning of October 4th each year, a town crier goes to each house in the village calling out the message they remember having heard for the first time from Francis: “*Buon giorno, buona gente.*”

**“For it is only when she is in contact with the profound aspirations of men [sic.] that the Church is renewed by a fresh reading of the Gospel.”**

Leclerc tells us that we cannot, of our own accord, create the confluence of variables that merged into the profound God-moment in which Francis lived, but it is our duty “not to let them pass by when they do appear. When the world's field commences to open up and offers new furrows, it is time to sow the seed even if this means exposing

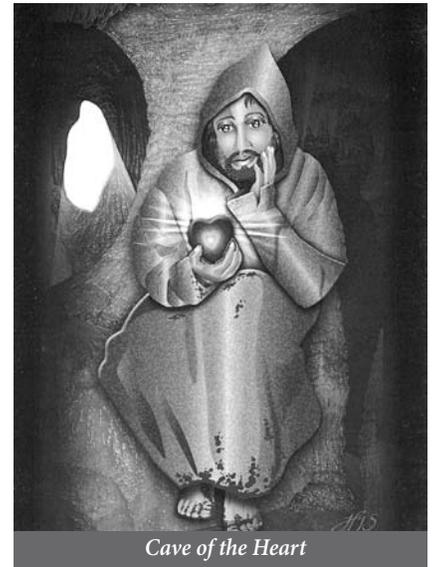
oneself to the stormwinds [sic.] of history.” (141) Clinging to old, outmoded structures will automatically blind us to the occurrence of God-moments similar to the God-moment of Francis’ day.

Even with all necessary variables in place, we cannot recreate the primitive Franciscan experience that holds so much fascination for us. However, should we be so blessed as to be entrusted with a similar opportunity, our recreation of a comparable experience, according to Leclerc, should bear the same distinctive characteristics as the primitive Franciscan experience:

1. “a sharing of life with the most humble,
2. a rejection of the supremacy of money,

3. a search for a truly fraternal human community, and
4. understanding of and appreciation for the concrete, individual person,
5. a deep regard and respect for nature, and
6. all of this integrated into a living and intimate contact with the humanness of God.” (143)

*“it is only when she is in contact with the profound aspirations of men [sic.] that the Church is renewed by a fresh reading of the Gospel. And in the same way it is only in the light of this fresh reading that the demands of history can be seen in their full human dimensions.” (142)*



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By Eloi Leclerc OFM

Synthesis provided by: Teresine Glaser OSF

**Eloi Leclerc OFM**, is a Franciscan friar born in 1921, Landerneau, France. Prior to WWII, when he was imprisoned by the Nazi regime, he was a professor of philosophy in Lille, France. In April, 1945, as Allied troops were invading Germany, Leclerc was among the 5,000 to 6,000 prisoners who were placed on prison trains in Buchenwald, likely intended either to be held hostage or exterminated. In his “Epilogue: The Language of the Soul’s Night” in *The Canticle of Creatures*, Leclerc shares excerpts from the diaries that he and four Franciscan friars, forced into one particular railway car, kept during their apparently purposeless twenty-one days winding through Czechoslovakia and Bohemia. Less than half of the prisoners survived. Leclerc relates that the last person “in our car” to die was one of the five friars. As their brother drew his last breath the remaining four friars burst spontaneously into singing *The Canticle to Brother Sun*. His works have been translated into several languages including Japanese, Korean and Chinese. Eloi Leclerc died May 13, 2016 in Saint-Servan, France.

SOURCE: Eloi Leclerc OFM, *Francis of Assisi: Return to the Gospel*, “Epilogue: The Encounter Between the Gospel and History,” trans. from French by Richard Arnandez, FSC. Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983, 135-143. Other books by Eloi Leclerc OFM, translated into English include: *The Canticle of Creatures — Symbols of Union: An Analysis of St. Francis of Assisi* trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970; *Exile and Tenderness* trans. Abbe Germain Marc’hadour, Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965; *The Song of the Dawn* trans. Paul Schwartz and Paul Lachance, Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977; *Wisdom of the Poverello* trans. Marie-Louise Johnson, M.D., Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1961 and 1989.

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