

# 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



## Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity:

### The Roots of Franciscan Christocentrism and Its Implications for Today

By Zachary Hayes OFM

### Overview of St. Francis' Spiritual Vision

There are three crucial insights to be discovered in the spirituality of St. Francis, and these were developed into distinctive theological perspectives by the authors of the Franciscan Order:

- Francis' focus on the figure of Christ;
- Francis' sense of God as a loving Father;
- Francis' sense of creation as a mirror and image of God.

Regardless of the chronological sequence of events in the life of Francis, there is a sort of logic that connects these perspectives. Although Francis was not a professional academic theologian, his spirituality evidenced in these events was such that it led with an inner logic to a style of Christology that became distinctive of the Franciscan tradition. This Christology, in turn, is cast against the background of a distinctive style of Trinitarian theology. And all of this finds expression in a rich theological understanding of creation.

### The Humanity of Christ

During his life's journey, the focus of Francis' experience is on the humanity of Christ: from the scene before the crucified Christ in the Church of San Damiano all the way through to his mystical experience on La Verna. These experiences of Incarnation — of cross and crib and Eucharist — both inspire and impel Francis to live his life in imitation of this Christ: the poor and suffering one who, in his human condition, could be recognized as neighbor and brother.

### God as a Loving, Generous Father

In the logic that connects these elements, if Christ is seen as brother, then it follows that God, who is Father of the eternal Son, may be seen in an analogous sense as Francis' Father as well. In the early days of his conversion, when Francis renounces his earthly father and claims God as his Father, he seems to express this new-found sense of filial relation to God. The awareness that he is son of this heavenly Father inspires and impels Francis to live in imitation of his brother, Jesus Christ — the one who is pre-eminently Son.

### Familial Understanding of the World of Creation

As this logical development proceeds, if it is true that Francis is son to a loving, heavenly Father, then this is equally true of all other people and things: all are related to and come from the same loving God. All should be seen, then, in terms of this familial relationship. The seeds of this sense of family, planted early on in the conversion process of Francis, became more intense as his life progressed. Near the end of his life, it culminated in the most sublime expression of the relationship that ought to exist between humanity and all other creatures: the Canticle of the Creatures. This familial understanding inspires and impels Francis to respect and reverence with a grateful heart all that is created as his sister and his brother.

### Development of This Vision in the Doctors of the Order: St. Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus

Although the crucified Christ played a foundational role throughout the life of Francis, the Franciscan theological tradition did not limit the discussion of the meaning of Christ to the reality of the cross. Rather, its authors moved from the story of Jesus and the cross/resurrection to the widest possible horizon of this story's impact and developed what today is called cosmic Christology. In its simplest terms, cosmic Christology captures the Franciscan conviction that a world without Christ is an incomplete world because the values involved in the life of Christ provide — for those who believe — a life-giving, fulfilling way of relating to all of reality.

## Scriptural and Traditional Roots for Cosmic Christology

From its inception, the Christian experience intuited that the significance of the person of Jesus was far more than the meaning restricted only to one human being's life. From a post-resurrection perspective, the earliest disciples began to view Jesus' life against a broader landscape, that is, as the paradigm for all authentic human living.

Beyond this perception, the writings of John and Paul, as well as the Letter to the Hebrews, indicate that the meaning of Jesus is embedded even from the very beginning as creation emerges from the mind and will of God. When John speaks of the "Word" in his Gospel Prologue, it is a way of naming a mystery which contains a divine clue as to the structure and meaning of the universe itself. This clue reveals that the mystery of creation and the mystery of incarnation are intrinsically connected. What happens in and through Jesus comes to be seen as the representative piece of a humanity and of the entire cosmic reality that has come home to God. In the incarnation, the divine aim for creation has been realized.

Especially among Western presentations of Christology, the Franciscan tradition has remained uniquely faithful to this understanding. What follows from this is the conviction that Jesus is about more than helping us to get rid of sin. While redemption is about the overcoming of sin, salvation is about more than this. It is about the completion of what God initiates in creating. So, the issue of overcoming sin is a matter of overcoming all obstacles that stand in the way of accomplishing God's creative aim: the fullest possible sharing of life and love between God and creation. Both of these are what we discover in the mystery of Christ.

### Christ as the Point of Departure

Primarily, Francis' experience of Christ serves to reveal to him a God who is Father. This role of Christ as revealer of God is developed extensively by Bonaventure. According to Bonaventure, in our meeting with one who is believed to be Son, we discover the meaning of God in a distinctively Christian sense. The function

## Principal Themes

Four interrelated ways of viewing reality derive from this theological understanding:

1. **Christ as the point of departure;**
2. **God as triune love is Creator;**
3. **World as a gift of a loving Creator;**
4. **Humans as sisters and brothers in a cosmic family.**



of Christ, then, is to stand at the center of all reality and reveal its meaning even from the very beginning of the divine plan.

Using a spatial metaphor, Bonaventure argues that because this Son who is "Word" dwells at the very center of the Godhead, the same Word is the invisible principle of unity and meaning through which God reaches out to create the world. But this same Word becomes the visible center of the cosmos and its history in the form of the incarnate Word. Thus it is the shape of Jesus' history and ministry that embodies the divine clue as to the structure of all reality. It is essential, then, for us to pattern our own lives on the values of Jesus for, in this way, we are centered in the mystery of the Word that lies at the heart of the Trinity.

### God as Triune Love Is Creator

The primal insight of Francis into the mystery of God was his experience of God as a loving Creator. For Franciscan theologians, then, reflection on the mystery of the Trinity would become a matter of seeking deeper insight into the mystery of divine love. For Bonaventure, the creative and sustaining principle of all created reality is a mystery of orderly love, not of arbitrariness or domination or control.

Such an understanding views power as the ability to call forth through love the good in the other. If this is so, we are invited to shape our relationships with all of created reality in a familial way, grounded as we are together in the mystery of God's creative love. For Scotus, however, such familial relationships always reverence and respect the inviolable uniqueness of each individual creature coming as gift from the hand of this loving Creator, a metaphysical notion which he identifies using the Latin term *haecceitas*.

### World as a Gift of a Loving Creator

Francis' vision reached from the loving Creator to the richness and beauty of the gift which pours forth in the work of creation. The Franciscan understanding of the meaning of poverty is rooted here. For Bonaventure, in fact, the meaning of poverty lies basically in recognizing that all things in the created universe, myself included, come as a pure gift from the loving, creative power of God. Our first response to such giftedness is awe and gratitude, not a search for possession and control. And our ongoing challenge is to discover how one most appropriately receives and lives with and in such giftedness.

Because for both Bonaventure and Scotus God is the mystery of a self-diffusive kind of overflowing love that is beyond measure, it is not surprising to them that there should be such a rich variety of created "words" through which the eternal mystery of Love finds expression in creation. By analogy, then, creation is like the Creator in terms of divine simplicity and boundless fertility. Although the elements of the created order are few and simple, they come together to produce a staggering richness of both non-living and living forms.

According to Bonaventure, the deepest truth about the created world is that it has within itself the potential to become, through God's grace, something of what has already come to be in the mystery of Christ: like Christ, creation can receive and respond to the self-communication of the mystery of divine love. Moreover, what has happened between God and the world in Christ points to the future of the cosmos, a future that involves the radical transformation of created reality through the unitive power of God's creative love.

## Humans as Sisters and Brothers in a Cosmic Family

Such an understanding of the common destiny shared by all that is created grounds Francis' sense of the familial relations that should exist between all creatures since they come from a common Creator. Because all share sisterhood and brotherhood in Christ, we relate to one another shaped by his values. If we live from this Christ-centered approach, Bonaventure assures us of a life that will be ultimately fulfilling because it opens us in a most radical sense to the mystery of the divine.

Such a radical response empowers us to embrace the world in its truest reality, discovering in Christ the bond that unites the mystery of our own origin and end. This is the core of our spiritual journey in and with the world into the mystery of God. Because Christ embodies the whole of creation in his individual human nature, all of the material universe is transformed in the living presence of God. It is significant to realize that, in this vision, the world will not be destroyed but will be brought to the conclusion which God intends for it from the beginning. And that beginning is anticipated in the mystery of the incarnate Word and the glorified Christ.

## The Absolute Primacy of Christ: An Explanation of This Doctrine

According to Scotus' doctrine of the absolute primacy of Christ, God creates so that Christ may come into existence. So that Christ may exist, there must be a human race. But a human race needs a place in which to live and this place is the created cosmos. So it is that, for both Bonaventure and Scotus, though for each in a distinctive way, a cosmos without Christ is like an arch without its keystone: its simply does not hold together. But with Christ, all comes together in unity and coherence and is finally brought to its destiny in God.

This understanding does not negate the cross. Rather, it insists that the tragic outcome of the history of Jesus was not the motive for the incarnation. If one can speak at all of a motive for incarnation, it must lie in the pure and uncoerced love of God and not in anything outside of God. This conviction makes it clear that, even if

Adam had not sinned, Christ would have come, possibly in the mode of glory.

However, given the reality of sin, the incarnation serves not only its primary function as the completion of creation, but a secondary function necessitated by the need to overcome any obstacles on the way to that completion. This incarnation in suffering, which culminates on the cross, is redemptive in a way that brings God's creative action in the world to completion and is, therefore, salvific in the most comprehensive sense of that term.

## Implications of This Christology

From this style of Christology, we draw out five major implications:

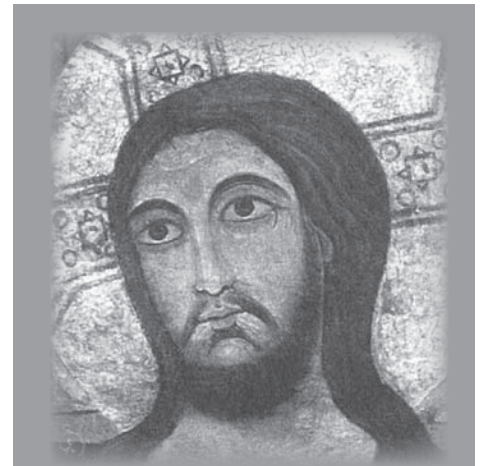
- The understanding of human identity;
- The nature of our world;
- The message of the kingdom of God;
- The theory of redemptive completion;
- The approach to interreligious dialogue.

## The Understanding of Human Identity

We are challenged by this Christology to become our own unique expression of the image of Christ in our world by appropriating the values of Christ in the depths of our own life and by allowing these values to shape our self-understanding as well as our relationships with others. Because the mystery of the incarnate Word is so rich, the varieties of gifts with which the Spirit endows individuals become appropriate forms of expressing the wealth of the Christ-mystery. We are not to become carbon-copies of the historical Jesus; rather, we are to embody something of the Word in the "word" of ourselves in a distinctive and personal way.

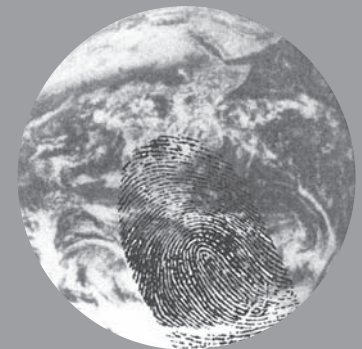
## The Nature of Our World

We are challenged by this vision to see the cosmos as the body of the eternal Word. If the Word is the internal self-expression of God, then the cosmos is what comes into being when the divine Word is expressed in something that is external to God. The cosmos, then, is to be read as the primal book of divine self-revelation. And the meaning of the cosmos is concentrated in humanity and radicalized in the person of Jesus Christ.



This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched — We speak of the word of life. This life became visible, we have seen and bear witness to it. And we proclaim to you the eternal life that was present to the Father and became visible to us. What we have seen and heard, we proclaim in turn to you, so that you may share life with us. This kinship of ours is with the Father and with the Son, Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:1–3



Such an understanding dispels any sense of cosmic terror because the whole universe created in Christ is in the process of coming home to God. The gifts of the earth, then, are not ours to exploit or to use simply for our own pragmatic ends. Rather, they are to be revered by human beings whose responsibility it is to return them to God as their final destiny.

### The Message of the Kingdom

We are challenged by the doctrine of the primacy of Christ to become involved in overcoming the obstacles to the coming of the kingdom by faithfully communicating a message about the eternal significance of creation and of human efforts to create a better world. In light of this truth, we are committed to loving our world and calling to expression its inherent goodness.

### The Theory of Redemptive Completion

We are challenged by this understanding to integrate a creational theology and a redemptive theology. Completion refers to the process of bringing creation to its God-intended end which is anticipated in the destiny of Christ. Redemption refers to the necessary process of dealing with all the obstacles that stand in the way of that completion. Such a perspective creates a larger framework for spirituality and theology more resonant with contemporary cultural images.

### The Approach to Interreligious Dialogue

Finally, we are challenged by the universalist implications of this Christological

vision to enter into conversation with other religious traditions with a strong sense of Christian identity but without any self-righteous sense of an absolute possession of Absolute Truth. Each tradition may reveal something of significance. Pluralism and conversation do not have to mean total relativism. Such a genuine openness to the truth of the other is critical for those serving in the ministry of evangelization.

### Conclusion

The insights foundational to Franciscan spirituality and theology need to be retrieved and brought into conversation with the questions and needs of contemporary people and the problems of a greatly troubled world. This treasure that is our tradition has much to offer for the healing of humanity and of the world at large.

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Zachary Hayes OFM

“A magisterial synthesis of the Franciscan worldview” — Michael Blastic OFM

Given at Anaheim CA, 1995 and Neumann University, Aston, PA 2003 • Synthesis by Clare D’Auria OSF

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#### Selected Readings

*The Hidden Center: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure.* St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1996

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**This full presentation** is in *The Cord*, 46.1 (1996) 3-17.

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