

# 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.

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## It Pleases Me That You Should Teach Sacred Theology Franciscans Doing Theology<sup>1</sup>

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### A Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua

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.

### Introduction

Franciscans realize that they are neither monastic nor apostolic and claim for themselves the description “evangelical.” The rediscovery of the evangelical form of life has emerged from a systematic reflection on the experience of Franciscan living in the light of the early sources, which include not only the writings and hagiographical texts of Francis and Clare but also the writings of great theologians of the Order. Because of the contemporary focus on ministry, there is reluctance to associate “doing” with “theology.” Thus, we dichotomize what was an integral experience of Christian living.

### Franciscan Evangelical Theology

Francis wrote a letter to Anthony that expressed his support for Anthony’s ministry of teaching theology to the brothers, with the provision that it be subject to the prescription of the Rule—that it “not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion” (LR, V:2). It is significant that, by the time the *Legenda assidua* was published in 1232 celebrating the life of the recently canonized Anthony, there is no mention of this letter of Francis. The *Assidua* presents Anthony as a preacher and teacher, the effective remedy to heretical inroads into orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Anthony was simply doing what every Friar Minor was doing, albeit in a unique and outstanding manner. Franciscan life was understood as the public, official, effective, learned, and exemplary proclamation of the Gospel in a manner adapted to the specific audience gathered, to the time, the place, and the occasion. Thus, Francis’s granting permission for Anthony to do what he was doing was not germane to the Anthony presented in the *Assidua*, who was simply defining the life of the Friar Minor. Yet, the sermon collections that he authored are far from the style of preaching we associate with Francis and the early companions. Anthony represents another model of Franciscan life, and thus he is important for our understanding the origins and nature of that life.

Zachary Hayes demonstrates that the Franciscan theological tradition is based on reflection, by theologians of the Order, on the religious experience of Francis and Clare.<sup>2</sup> *The Franciscan form of evangelical life, then, is ultimately concerned with “doing” theology. It implies that Franciscans do what Francis and Clare did, not only with their heart and hands, but also with their heads.*

Anthony was not an innovator in this regard. *Thomas of Celano, in his Vita prima (c. 1229), was the first “published” Franciscan theologian to do theology explicitly in this Franciscan manner.* His work, a theological and hagiographical masterpiece, was a means of promulgating Francis’s cult. *Celano approached his task as a theologian, inserting the saint into the history of salvation while at the same time preserving Francis’s three basic intuitions relative to a) the Christian’s relationship to the world, b) the meaning of the human Christ, and c) the nature of the human person.*

<sup>1</sup> This paper was given at the National Franciscan Forum, *Franciscans Doing Theology*, June 10-15, 1997, in Colorado Spring, CO, and sponsored by The Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University.

<sup>2</sup> See among other articles of Zachary Hayes, “Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity,” *The Cord* 46:1 (Jan./Feb.1996): 3-17.

## The Franciscan Worldview

According to Celano, Francis, after the initial enthusiasm of his conversion, worked in a monastery kitchen, but ultimately was forced to leave because it did not provide for his basic needs. So “he went to the city of Gubbio, where he obtained a small tunic from a certain man who once had been his friend” (1C 16). While the monastery (a Church institution) did not supply his needs, an old friend (a secular-social institution) did. His intuition that the world is good and provides for authentic human needs is a basis for experiencing poverty as abundance. Thus, Celano makes a theological commentary on a teaching of Francis:



*“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).  
The truly pure of heart are those who look down upon the things of earth and seek the things of heaven, and who never cease to adore and behold the Lord God living and true with a pure heart and soul (Adm XVI).<sup>3</sup>*

Note the lack of dichotomy between God and the world. ♦ *This insight is a theology of manifestation—creation shows forth the abundance of the good God.*<sup>4</sup>

This leads to a ♦ *second Franciscan intuition—the meaning of the human Christ*. Celano develops Francis’s relationship to creation in terms of his “reading” Christ in creation, culminating with the celebration at Greccio. What Francis saw as he “looked down on the things of the earth” was “the image of him who made himself poor for us in the world” (1C 76). Flowers, lambs, worms, poor men and women, lepers and people who suffer—all are recognized in Christ at Greccio. Francis wanted to do something that “would recall to

memory the little Child who was born in Bethlehem and [to] set before our bodily eyes in some way the inconveniences of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he lay upon the hay where he had been placed” (1C 84). This is a significant theological statement about the meaning of the incarnation—

*to look at Christ is to affirm the goodness of the world and to see ourselves in Christ’s place, that is, in the world. The meaning of the world, and hence of the human person, is revealed in Christ.*

Thirdly, Celano suggests that in Francis’s vision of the crucified seraph something important about the human person is revealed. Celano depicts “a man standing above him, like a seraph with six wings, his hands extended and his feet joined together and fixed to a cross” (1C 94). Celano comments about the “kind and gracious look with which he [Francis] saw himself regarded” while, at the same time, “the sharpness of [the man’s] suffering filled Francis with fear.” The paradox of the gracious look of the suffering man expresses a profound insight into Francis’s own experience. The last years of his life were filled with suffering—physical, psychological, and spiritual. ♦ *Human flesh carries within it the dying of Jesus, who reveals authentic humanness—fragile, limited, and vulnerable.*

## Implications for the Franciscan Form of Evangelical Life

These three intuitions concerning the world, Jesus Christ, and the human person constitute an axis around which Celano tells the story of Francis and with which he presents a synthesis of Franciscan evangelical theology, describing the implications for the praxis of Francis’s life. In the *Vita prima*, we

recognize a dynamic progress: Francis’s conversion culminates in his hearing the Word (1-22) and leads him to action and presence in the world (23-70). This, in turn, serves as the location for his life of contemplation where he sees Christ in creation, culminating in Greccio (71-87), and leads ultimately to his transformation in receiving the stigmata (88-118), through which the dynamic begins again. Celano thus describes the Franciscan form of life—one moves from conversion to action and contemplation, through which one is transformed. The integration of these dynamics is centered in the human person in the world and focused on the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Here the pattern of the spiritual life shifts as a result of Celano’s theological intuitions. The traditional understanding of progress in the spiritual life had been described in a monastic pattern of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. One had to “climb up a ladder” and be separated from the distractions of the world. However, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this ladder began to lose its meaning. Advances in learning heralded the birth of a new worldview. New social configurations began to emerge with the commune. Static feudal structures surrendered to more mobile urban social organizations. Aristocratic dynastic power centers gave way to the democracy of the city. A money-based economy fostered travel and trade. These developments impacted Christian experience, and an evangelical reawakening trickled down to ordinary, *sincere Christians eager for a greater participation in the promises of the Gospel*. Francis and Clare arrived on the scene at the cusp of this development. Their life experiences led to a new understanding of the Christian life and to a corresponding evangelical pattern of perfection that did not presume separation from the world, *but rather insertion into it as mediators of God’s presence and goodness.*

<sup>3</sup> This is a modified translation of that of Regis Armstrong in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1982), 32, who translated *despicere* more literally as “despise.”

<sup>4</sup> Cf. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (NY: Crossroad, 1981): 376-385.

*Celano presents Francis and Clare's form of life as the embodiment of a Franciscan evangelical theology. This theology serves the understanding of the foundational intuitions and vision of Francis and Clare and provides a basis for the Franciscan form of life. Celano is "doing" theology as he tells the story.*

## Theological Contributions of Bonaventure and Scotus

The theological work of *Bonaventure* develops the intuitions of Celano from the *evangelical perspective of the good*. Scotus, for his part, develops them theologically in terms of the incarnation as first in God's intention and the motive for creation.

Francis's writings are replete with praise and acknowledgement of God's goodness. God is simply "good." No more can be said about the nature of God. Bonaventure, reflecting on the meaning of Francis's life, creates a *summa* of Franciscan theology (*The Soul's Journey into God*), keenly interested in how we are able to experience God. The journey begins outside the human person in creation, returns to the human person, and mounts above in an attempt to speak about the nature of God, whose most perfect name is "Good." Bonaventure connects the sixth wing of the Seraph with the gospel revelation of God as good.<sup>5</sup> This naming of God as Good is attributed to Jesus himself in the context of the story of the rich young man—a gospel text important to Francis and used by him to articulate the meaning of Franciscan life (ER I:4).

Bonaventure's reflection led him to understand the Trinitarian processions and relations as expressive of self-diffusive goodness in an immanent way within God-self and reaching outside of God toward creation in terms of the union of "God and man in the unity of the Person of Christ."<sup>6</sup> Thus Bonaventure articulates the implications of the statement about Christmas attributed to Francis in the Assisi. Compilation: "Because he was born, we knew we would



*St. Francis appears at the Chapter of Arles while Anthony is preaching.*  
Artist: Giotto. Basilica of St. Francis, Upper Church, Assisi.

be saved" (AC 14). In the suffering and lowliness assumed in the flesh of the incarnate Jesus Christ, the goodness of God and the world and human life is revealed. This is kenotic goodness, enfleshed in humanness. The first principal becomes the last—humanity created on the sixth day. God bends down to creation so that creation might know its own goodness as the goodness of God!

*John Duns Scotus begins with the love of God*, suggesting that anything less than love is inadequate to explain God's action. Human sin could never be a motive for God's acting. God creates so that Christ might become incarnate, the embodiment of God's love in the created order. Creation then exists for the sake of the incarnation and thus requires an approach to ethics from the vantage point of the natural affection for justice or the "harmony of goodness."<sup>7</sup> Mutuality is central. Reflecting the love of God, it is the principle for ordering the relation between the individual and

the community—and thus *haecceitas* (thisness or the uniqueness of the individual) cannot be comprehended or intuited apart from the community. *Scotus's theological insights lead us to a new appreciation of the intuitions of Francis and Clare*. Because meaning is expressed in values and values are revealed in behavior, there exists a direct connection and mutual relationship between Franciscan theology and the evangelical form of Franciscan life. Franciscan theology is essential to the Franciscan *forma vitae*.

Over time, there has been a significant variety within the Franciscan theological tradition. The various schools all emerge from the tradition of Francis, but each develops a specific focus. Bonaventure is more mystical-cosmic-Christological; Scotus is more scientific-cosmic-metaphysical. Later we have William of Ockham, who is more logical-ecclesiological-philosophical. However, as diverse as each vein of thought is, each

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Soul's Journey into God*, V:2 in *Bonaventure*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press 1978) 94-95.

<sup>6</sup> *Soul's Journey into God*, VI:4; Cousins 106.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Mary Beth Ingham, *The Harmony of Goodness: Mutuality and Moral Living according to John Duns Scotus* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1996).

can be connected directly or indirectly to the religious experience of Francis and Clare.

## The Present Historical Moment as Opportunity

Today, the world looks forward with hope to a time when the aspirations of the human heart might be realized in a manner that would announce what Christians speak of as the “Kingdom of God.” We cannot help but be dismayed, however, by the way things really are—violence, wars, crime, abuse, impoverishment, ecological disaster, international realignments, religious discrimination, the dissolution of the family, the hopelessness of drugs. These suggest the failure of human ingenuity and institutions to achieve well-thought-out purposes and goals. The modern human project, born of the enlightenment, asserted the superiority of human reason, believing that it gave meaning and purpose to everything. Unfortunately, the separation of thought from feeling, of content from form, of theory from practice led to the dissolution of the “felt synthesis” of most ancient and medieval thinkers. The cosmos was

reduced to nature, and science adopted a dominating attitude. God disappeared into a greater hiddenness and otherness. The self became more autonomous and individualistic, isolated by choice from the cosmos, the divine, and the other.

David Tracy states that “the hope of Christians is to resist evil and transform suffering. That hope is grounded in the central Christian metaphor of 1 John 4:16: God is love.”<sup>8</sup> *Implicitly and explicitly, Tracy names our Franciscan theological tradition*, which resists separating thought from feeling and proposes an affective rationality as the measure of truth. It refuses to separate content from form and proposes that the world is not made up simply of things, but that everything, in its particularity and unique shape, size, color, and appearance, manifests the truth that God is good.

The Franciscan tradition refuses to separate theory from practice, affirming that life is the place where God is to be recognized, experienced, named, and loved.

Our Franciscan theological tradition responds then to three significant questions posed by our times:

1. What does it mean to be human?
2. What are the values and roles of social institutions?
3. How are we to deal with differences, with otherness?

## Conclusion

The challenge placed before Franciscans today is how to respond to these significant questions meaningfully using the great treasure of our Franciscan worldview and charism. We need the help of theology to mediate the meaning of Francis and Clare for us and for our contemporary world, and so we must come to know our Franciscan theologians. *Retrieving Franciscan evangelical life demands “doing” Franciscan theology* — an exercise that will enrich the quality of life of the Franciscan body and provide a foundation for more effective witness to the good God. We have wonderful forbears who continue to show us a way in our world and for our day.

<sup>8</sup> David Tracy, “Evil, Suffering, Hope: The Search for New Forms of Contemporary Theodicy,” *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 50 (1995): 31.

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