

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
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A Franciscan Language for the 21st Century

William Short OFM

We are heirs to an intellectual patrimony that spans eight centuries, with a worldview that can offer fresh responses to questions posed in our society and church today. We have resources to share, and a responsibility to share them with those who are searching for “good news” in our day.

“What is the Franciscan tradition?” and “How can we translate that tradition today?” A brief historical sketch may help to set the stage for our discussion.

During Francis’s lifetime, in the 1220s, some of his followers arrived in Paris, or rather just outside its walls. As their numbers grew, they moved into the neighborhood that was growing rapidly with the influx of students attracted to the new University being established there. Soon some of those students joined the Franciscan Order, and with them came a tenured University professor named *Alexander of Hales*, rightly considered one of the founders of *Franciscan theology*. His student, Bonaventure, a classmate of Thomas Aquinas, brought the figure of Francis himself, with all his complexity, into the lively theological debates of the day, creating a new intellectual synthesis based on a Franciscan spirituality that was Trinitarian, incarnational, and mystical all at once.

Presented here are a few basic components of the Franciscan intellectual tradition, with a set of questions regarding their impact on our educational endeavors. These basic premises of Franciscan thought, with much variation and development, can be considered recurring themes over the long arc of history, as our intellectual tradition has developed in varied cultures in vastly different times and places.

Human Person as Divine Image

“Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord 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.” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 131)

This saying, chosen from the “Admonitions” of Francis, reveals some of the reasons for his reverent treatment of every person he met. The “iconic” character of the person, as image of the “beloved Son,” created as God’s likeness, is rooted in the Franciscan tradition from its very beginnings. *Our humanity does not separate us from God, but connects us to God who chose to become human in Jesus because of generous love.*

I would suggest that this fundamental belief in the value of the human person finds expression in our institutions in a variety of ways. The quality of our communication with each other, the attention we give to student services, the concern to involve the “whole person” in our educational programs: all of these can be grounded and shaped by attention to the personal dimension of the Franciscan tradition.

What “word” can such a view of the person speak today within the world of the human sciences? Can anthropology be religiously significant? Does psychology present us with basic material for the work of theology? Does sociology then have a deeply spiritual significance?

How would these disciplines become dialogue partners in translating the Franciscan tradition into a language that is understandable today?



All Creation in the Incarnate Word

“Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 114)

Reverence for the person within our tradition is only part of a greater vision of equality: we consider others our brothers and sisters. But these “others,” our “kin,” include a vast family. In his “Canticle of Creatures,” quoted above, Francis speaks of every creature, from heavenly bodies to earthly elements, as brother or sister to him.

Beginning with that profound, poetic intuition of Francis, Franciscan scholars like Bonaventure at the University of Paris began to spell out its implications: everything was made through the Word; all was created for the Word, all was created in the Word. And in Christ that Word took on flesh, that is, the creative divine Word took on the form of physical matter, embodied, “incarnate.”

Only in recent years are we beginning to understand its implications for the world of the sciences. *Whether in the field of physics or astronomy, biology or chemistry, attention to the physical world has a profoundly spiritual meaning in our tradition.* Older dichotomies of “science versus religion” cannot hold up within such a holistic view of the universe. Attention to the environment goes hand-in-hand with reverence for human beings; both global warming and global impoverishment affect our “brothers and sisters.” To use a phrase I like, within the Franciscan intellectual tradition, “Matter matters.”

Community Is Divine

*“You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;
You are the good, all good, the highest good,
Lord God living and true.”* (Armstrong, 2000, p. 109)

American religious experience has been profoundly shaped by a view of God and the human person that is deeply monistic: a God who is considered only as “the One,” and the “rugged individual” as the image of that God. What is most “godly” is isolation, self-sufficiency, absolute independence.

The Franciscan tradition describes an inter-relational communion of divine persons, a Trinitarian God, in a constant, dynamic interchange of love and life — that “goodness” so well expressed in Francis’s “Praises of God” quoted above. Sharing a fundamental unity does not require the suppression of personal identity, but enhances it. Diversity of persons is enriching; goodness is self-diffusive; the living dialogue of love is essential to being; distinctiveness is divine.

Rooted in this vision of God, our intellectual tradition, particularly in theology, can offer rich resources for thinking about community and society. *Far from exalting the isolated individual, a Trinitarian view of reality always looks to the individual-in-relationship, to the bonds of interdependence as images of the divine.* Though this reflection has found expression in the past primarily in theological disciplines, its implications can become much broader. How could such a religious view help to shape economic policies that reflect communion in the sharing of resources? What elements could it offer to the field of political science and the analysis of governmental institutions? How could it shape an understanding of international relations and foreign policy?

Christ at the Heart of Reality

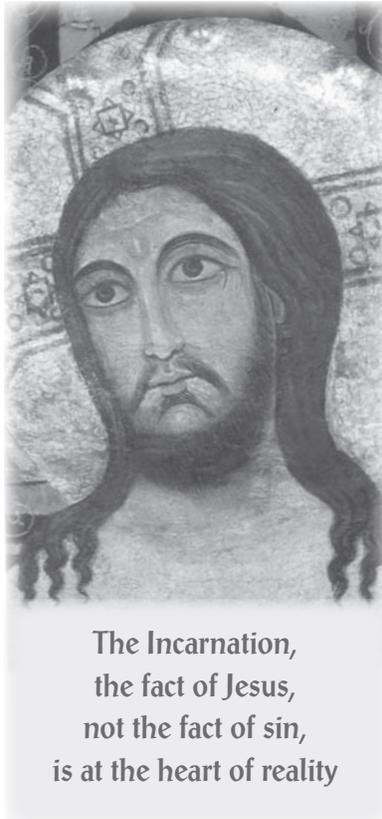
*“We thank You for as through Your Son
You created us, so through Your holy love . . .
You brought about His birth.”*

(Armstrong, 2000, p. 82)

At every hour of the day Christian preachers on radio and television send a constant message into thousands of American cars, living rooms, and workplaces: “It’s all about sin!” God sent Jesus Christ into the world because we sinned; he had to suffer because we sinned; the world is a passing theater scene on which the drama of human sin is played out. At the end, the sinners will be punished. It would seem that sin is the center of the universe; and both evangelical Protestant and Catholic preachers repeat that message. Does the Franciscan tradition say anything different?

The Franciscan view, rather than focusing on sin, emphasizes the love of God, enfleshed in Christ, as the center of reality. In the 14th century John Duns Scotus was asked, “Would Christ have come if Adam had not sinned?” Contradicting the predominant thinking of his age (and ours), he answered: “Yes.” Christ came because the divine Trinitarian communion of persons wished to express divine life and goodness. For that reason the whole universe was made in the image of the divine Word, and that Word came to participate in the life of the universe as a created being, a creature, to show in a concrete, material way the form and model of all creation, made in the divine image. *The Incarnation, the fact of Jesus, not the fact of sin, is at the heart of reality.* The circumstances of that Incarnation included suffering and death, caused by human sin, and Jesus’s generous giving of life for others reversed the effects of sin. *But salvation from sin is a consequence of the Incarnation, not its motivating cause.*

How might this view express itself in practice? It demands the difficult belief that goodness, not evil, lies at the heart of human experience, and that religious institutions have a role in expressing that belief. It would require of us an “alternative evangelism,” one which, in word and action, portrays a God in solidarity with human suffering out of love, rather than a God who demands the sacrifice of victims. *The focus is not on “fighting sin” but on “giving life.”* Such an approach could find eloquent expression in campus ministry programs; in the way Catholic doctrine is presented, in the public expressions of religious faith organized on a campus, whether for students or the wider community.



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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.”* (Armstrong, 2000, p. 76)

Francis considers every good thing a gift he has received from a generous God, whose “poverty” consists in this constant giving to others in order to enrich their lives. We are “godly” when we enrich others with our generous giving, whether of talent, learning, work, wisdom or wealth. All really belongs to God—and we thank God by distributing generously to others the gifts we have received. In this way

we act out who we really are: images of a generous God. This awareness that everything is a gift lies at the heart of a “Franciscan economics,” in which all things are gifts, to be used to enrich the life of others, not as possessions to be guarded jealously from the needs of others.

The Franciscan tradition was born in the early days of the Western European profit economy of the 1200s. *From its inception, our tradition has not shied away from the world of business and commerce, but has tried to engage it in policy reform and promotion of ethical practices.*

Franciscans were among the first to propose notions of a “just profit” in commerce, as a response to demands for unreasonable profits among medieval merchants. To offset the crippling effects of exorbitant interest rates on loans, they helped in the establishment of those early Italian “credit unions” called the *monti di pietà*. A Franciscan of Venice, Luca Pacioli, a teacher of Leonardo da Vinci, is even credited by some with the invention of double-entry bookkeeping.

In our present-day economic environment, with its competition among a few for the control of resources used by many, how can we translate this notion of an economy of gifts? With the globalization of the world economy, what “word” can we speak from our intellectual tradition? How can we engage seriously in discussions on the right to private property, welfare reform, and the forgiveness of international debts? *How do we form our institutional investment policies to reflect our beliefs?*

These examples from the Franciscan tradition could be multiplied to examine other topics: the roles of the Church and civil government; the interrelationships of men and women; the exercise of leadership and governance.

These few indications serve here only to indicate that the Franciscan tradition has a distinctive approach to questions, one that is not well known or commonly viewed as typical of religious discourse in our day.

Steps Toward Retrieving a Tradition

In 2001 the Commission for the Retrieval of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition (CFIT) began its work. This group of scholars, organized by the superiors of Franciscan Friars (the English-Speaking Conference of the Order of Friars Minor), was charged to make available to the English-speaking world the riches of the Franciscan intellectual tradition in an accessible form. This was to occur on several levels:

- On the research and academic level, the Commission sponsors annual academic presentations at the WTU symposium, and The Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University publishes the results. The first publications of this series are: *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* (2001) and *Franciscans and Post-Modernism* (2002). Further volumes were projected on Creation, Church, and Biblical Foundations for the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition.
- On a more popular level (college students, parishioners), the Commission publishes a series of booklets (approximately 40 pages each) on basic themes of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition. The first two booklets (published by The Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University in 2003), are *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition* (Kenan Osborne, OFM); and *The Franciscan View of Creation* (Ilia Delio, OSF). Other volumes are scheduled to appear that treat *Johannine Themes in Franciscan Theology*:

An Examination of the San Damiano Crucifix (Michael Guinan, OFM); and *The Franciscan View of the Human Person: Some Central Elements* (Dawn Nothwehr OSF). While these first booklets include philosophical and theological components of the tradition, the series is planned to touch a wide range of topics, including the natural sciences and the arts.

The Task Ahead of Us

From even this brief review of current projects on the Franciscan tradition in the English-speaking world, we are right to believe that this tradition is experiencing a revival. The figure of Francis continues to fascinate a modern audience, whether in television specials, like “The Reluctant Saint” by Donald Spoto (on the Hallmark Channel, Palm Sunday 2003); or in a steady stream of new English biographies of the “Little Poor Man” of Assisi. As members of Franciscan institutions of higher learning, how can we make our own contribution to this revival?

We are heirs to an intellectual patrimony that spans eight centuries, with a worldview that can offer fresh responses to questions posed in our society and Church today. We have resources to share, and a responsibility to share them with those who are searching for “good news” in our day.

The Franciscan Language for the 21st Century

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