

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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Francis as Vernacular Theologian:

A link to the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition?

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Development of Theology

- Theologian is one who is a “professional practitioner of theology which is the scientific study of God and God’s relationship with the world.”
- Three Modes of the Development of Western Religious Thought:
 1. Scholasticism as a theology was developed approximately one hundred years before the time of Francis. This form of theology was comprised of three techniques:
 - Methodical commentary on an authoritative text
 - Systematic analysis and solution of dogmatic and moral issues
 - Synthetic drawing together of a coherent and comprehensive presentation of doctrine for the purpose of instruction
 2. Monastic Theology came about in the 1950’s developed by Jean Leclercq in which he studied mystical thinkers and writings of individuals who were not academicians and who expressed insights into the nature of God and God’s relationship with the world.
 3. Bernard McGinn, a leading expert on medieval thought, coined the term Vernacular Theology. This form of theology focused on an audience of ordinary women and men who sought to find God in their daily experiences instead of the educated elite or the monks and nuns in the enclosure.

Francis of Assisi as Vernacular Theologian

Bernard McGinn suggests that “Francis may well be thought of as one of the first major Vernacular Theologians.”

- Francis as a Theologian
 1. In the *Letter to the Entire Order* (1225-1226) Francis refers to himself as “ignorant, uneducated person” (v. 39) indicating that he was not formally trained.
 2. In various histories of the Order Francis is not listed among those recognized as theologians together with Anthony of Padua, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, John Duns Scotus or William of Ockham. The Franciscan School of Theology in Paris began after the death of Francis in the 1230’s. Philotheus Boehner in his classic *History of the Franciscan School* states that Francis “enters the story as the person who sparked the birth of the Franciscan movement by his desire to realize the Gospel ideal in a radical way.”
 3. In early biographies of Francis, the *Assisi Compilation* and Thomas of Celano’s *Second Life of Francis* recount how Francis’ interpretation of a passage from Ezekiel edified a member of the Order of Preachers. “Although this blessed man [Francis] was not learned in scholarly disciplines, still he learned from God wisdom from above and enlightened by the splendors of eternal light, he understood the Scriptures deeply.” (p. 314)



Humility of God

Every day God humbles himself just as he did when he came from his heavenly throne into the Virgin's womb; every day God comes to us and lets us see him in abjection, when God descends from the bosom of the Father into the hands of the priest at the altar.

Admonition One



You are Most High. You are humility.

Praises of God

Look, brothers, at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts to him.

Letter to Whole Order



"Francis as Vernacular Theologian"

Francis as "vernacular theologian" [*one whose writing and life demonstrates that all persons can experience God in the midst of the world, and communicate this for the ordinary person*] was "not simply a religious genius who sparked an evangelical renewal movement that would come to include great thinkers, but also as one who himself forged new understandings of God and of God's relation to the world."

... *To discover this profound theology, we must turn to his own writings, an effort that has begun only over the last twenty-five years.* Francis left some thirty works — mainly prayers and letters . . . Even though most of these are in Latin, they may be classified as examples of vernacular theology. . . . It is evident that he thought in Italian and then attempted to express his ideas in Latin. But despite this simple language and the occasional nature of his writings, scholars agree that they manifest a *remarkably coherent vision of God and creation.*

Thaddée Matura OFM has presented the most thorough analysis of this vision, and suggests two texts that may be taken as a key to unlocking it. These are the *Later Admonition and Exhortation* (formerly known as the *Second Letter to All the Faithful*) and chapter 23 of the *Earlier Rule of 1221*. [Thaddée Matura, *Francis of Assisi: The Message in His Writings*, 33.]

Francis came to view everything in his life as fashioned in love by an all-good God. . . . For Francis, everything was the gift of an utterly transcendent, unfathomable, but loving source.

Matura emphasizes several points in this connection that indeed link Francis with the subsequent *Franciscan theological tradition.*

- ❖ He emphasizes "the Father" as having a certain primacy within the Trinity. The overflowing goodness of God is evident first in God's inner life. . . . Francis does not associate this title primarily with reference to us, but as "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." . . . If we are God's "sons" and "daughters," it is because we are incorporated *into a relationship that already exists at the very heart of God.* [N.B. The Office of the Passion]

Continues on bottom of page 3

■ Theological Vision of Francis

A careful reading and studying of the writings of Francis of Assisi assist in an understanding of Francis as a vernacular theologian. Thaddée Matura suggests a review of the *Later Admonition and Exhortation* and Chapter 23 of the *Early Rule*.

1. Language: The language that Francis uses to describe God is derived from Biblical and Liturgical Sources. To illustrate this point Chapter 23 of the *Early Rule* is helpful. “*With our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with our whole strength and fortitude, with our whole understanding . . . let us all love the Lord God, who has given and gives to each one of us our whole body, our whole soul, and our whole life, who has created, redeemed, and will save us by His mercy alone, who did and does everything good for us.*”(ER 23:8) Francis utilizes in his prayer the plural pronouns and not the singular

“I”. Another point to be highlighted in this selection from the *Early Rule* is that Francis in his prayer addresses God as Trinity — the three persons of God. This is different from attributing various works to the persons of the Trinity.

2. Trinitarian Vision:

- The Father has primacy in the Trinity. Francis refers to God as Father, not in reference to us, rather as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christ is the beloved Son.
- In the *Later Exhortation* Francis writes: “We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of the Father Who is in heaven; mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience . . .” (v. 49) If God is triune, we too have a three fold relationship with God.

- All is fashioned in love by an all good God. Therefore, everything reveals the goodness of God. In Chapter 23 of the *Early Rule* gratitude is expressed to God. Francis refers to God as being “all powerful, most holy, almighty, and supreme God . . .” (v. 1) For Francis all is created in love by God. Francis saw all as gift.
- The *Canticle of Creation* is truly vernacular since it expresses a distinctive experience of God for everyone. Francis calls on every creature to praise God because of what God has created. Therefore, each creature is praiseworthy.
 - Each creature is beautiful in that it reflects God’s own nature.
 - Each creature is a brother and sister harmonizing the theophany in all of creation.
 - Each creature is an expression of God’s presence.

Continued from page 2

- ❖ Every created thing reveals the goodness of this loving God [i.e. 1221:23, 1, 5]. Francis best captures this insight in the *Canticle of the Creatures*, which Bernard McGinn considers his *most strikingly creative contribution as a vernacular theologian*. . . . The fact that Francis wanted this poem to remain in Italian and composed music for it demonstrated his intention to communicate a *distinctive experience of God to everyone*.
- ❖ The mystery of God as Trinity . . . For Francis Christ is always the Son, the Word and self-expression of the Father. . . . Taking our human nature, he makes his own flesh and blood the *language through which the Father’s total love for his brothers and sisters is expressed* [Early Rule 22.41].
- ❖ “Brother” — Francis’s experience of Christ as one equally like us and as one in compassion and solidarity as a member of the same family. “As the first-born of many brothers and sisters,” Christ has blazed the trail of faithful discipleship by his self-emptying love. In doing so he *“has left us an example that we might follow in his footsteps”* [2LTF 10-13].
- ❖ *Image of the Holy Spirit as Spouse. One of the most profoundly original contributions of Francis as a vernacular theologian.* Used by Francis to describe Our Lady, Clare, her sisters and every committed Christian: Spouse of the Holy Spirit! [See Dominic Monti, “The Experience of the Spirit in Our Franciscan Tradition,” *The CORD*, 49.3 (1999): 114-129.]

From St. Bonaventure on St. Francis: *Blessed Francis said that he wanted his brothers to study, but first to practice what they preached. After all, what is the use of knowing a lot, but tasting nothing?* (The Conferences on the Six Days of Creation)



- Traditionally Franciscan Theology is seen as Christocentric, however, in Francis' writings Christ is placed in the context of the Trinity. Christ is always the Son, Word and self-expression of the Father.
 - Francis views Christ by his two natures:
 - Christ humbles himself to dwell among us and sheds his blood for us
 - Christ fulfills destiny to be like God
3. *Letter to the Entire Order*: The Prayer at the end of the letter provides the image of the Holy Spirit as our spouse. "Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, may we be able to follow in the footprints of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 51) Francis in his writings makes a number of references of being spouse.
- In the Office of the Passion the Antiphon to the Blessed Virgin Mary Francis prays: "... Father in heaven, Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, Spouse of the Holy Spirit ..." Reference is not made to being the Spouse of Christ but rather of the Holy Spirit. Thereby emphasizing that all Christians are called to the same relationship will bring all to a heightened level of fulfilling the will of God.
 - To be a spouse of the Holy Spirit is basic to our relationship to God.
 - The Spirit is the bond of love. Therefore, in being open to the power of the Holy Spirit we will be transformed to what God desires and what we desire, to become one movement of love.
4. *Early Rule* Chapter 23: The image of spouse helps one to understand the doxology found in Chapter 23 of

the *Early Rule*. "[God] has created, redeemed and will save us by his mercy alone. Francis believed that redemption and salvation were not the same. Redemption took place by Christ. Salvation involves not only a continuing gift of God's love but also a personal response from us. Salvation is still unfolding and the fullness of God's love is yet to be revealed."

Conclusion

The selected writings of Francis reveal the depth of his understanding of God and God's relationship with creation. We are reminded in a careful reading of the writings of Francis of Assisi that it was not only a knowing but also a choosing God. Therefore, what is known by the head must also permeate the heart. Franciscan theologians always considered theology a practical science.



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