

# Custodians of the Tradition

*Reclaiming the Franciscan  
Intellectual Tradition*



**T**hose 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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## John Duns Scotus: Retrieving a Medieval Thinker for Contemporary Theology

Mary Beth Ingham CSJ

**T**he God of Scotus is the God of Francis, a God so generous he throws everything away out of love. This may be the very God our world so needs today.

The value of Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Dominican theologian, may perhaps lay not so much in the answers he offered for certain questions, but rather in the questions he raised and the way in which he raised them. I would like to make something of the same argument for John Duns Scotus. I suggest that we look at Scotus not so much for original and new answers to contemporary questions (although there are certainly original insights in Scotus, as I will note later), but rather for the manner in which Scotus viewed all that exists.

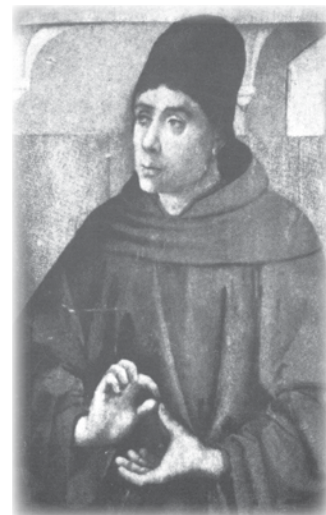
As the third millennium opens before us, it is important to recognize the way in which contemporary reflection recognizes its limits and searches for another model or paradigm. The cold war is over. Modern thought has been superseded by the so-called post-modern. Models of scientific objectivity and rationality no longer appear to help us deal with contemporary issues. Spiritual yearnings express themselves in New Age religion. In addition, the post-renaissance notion of science has done violence to creation. Technology dominates our societies, threatening human dignity and values. The world's goods are not shared equally; indeed the gap between rich and poor widens. In short, we are at a global turning point. We cast about for other ways of seeing our reality, hoping to find a way to integrate a world that has become too complex, too fragmented for us to bear.

Medieval thinkers hold a key for us today. I do not mean that we must return to a time in history that is long gone. Rather, I think that by taking a closer look at their intellectual legacy we might discover principles to help us integrate the scientific with the religious, the intellectual with the spiritual. We do not need to return to a triumphalist notion of religion to take advantage of the legacy of medieval thinkers. They can help us precisely insofar as they were religious and spiritual thinkers who saw the world in which they lived as a coherent whole. Therefore, the value of a person like Scotus today stems from his Franciscan vision of reality, as he articulates his intellectual insights to form a coherent whole where scientific, intellectual, and spiritual values are all present. In other words, the coherence of Scotus's intellectual insights stem from his spiritual vision, precisely insofar as he is a Franciscan.

If the insights of Francis of Assisi are relevant today and the Franciscan life has a witness for our world, then the intellectual formulation of those insights can be a powerful influence at a time in history when we need new intellectual models, new conceptual paradigms to understand our place in the world, our relationship to God and to one another, and ways that we might promote the reign of God in our own day.

In my own case, Scotus offered a series of interesting philosophical insights until I recognized the spiritual point behind it all. I had struggled for years to make sense of it and then, one day, it all fell into place. That was the day I realized the *centrality of beauty* for him as a Franciscan, along with the role of love and creativity. Creativity, love, and beauty are the foundation of his intellectual vision because of the particular spiritual tradition to which he belongs. This vision is grounded:

- in the power of ordered loving as central to a correct understanding of human nature as rational
- on the Trinity as model both for reality and for human relationships
- on an aesthetic perspective that is the basis for his discussion of moral goodness.



The God of Scotus is the God of John 3:16, who so loved the world he gave his only Son. He is the God of Paul's letter to the Ephesians 1: 4-6, who predestines all to glory. He is the God of Matthew 20, the Master who rewards workers far beyond what they deserve and wonders why some grumble because he is generous. Here is a notion of divine justice interpreted in terms of divine mercy and liberality, not in terms of a strict understanding of giving what is due. *The God of Scotus is the God of Francis, a God so generous he throws everything away out of love. This may be the very God our world so needs today.*

Scotus offers a renewed and more integrated way to understand the human person as both scientist and artist, philosopher and poet, a person of rational faith. In this he escapes the pitfall of Thomism, which more consciously embraces the scientific and philosophical. For Scotus, the aesthetic is more basic than the scientific and intellect is integrated within a broader context, defined not by knowing but by loving.

Generosity and love constitute the basis for Scotus's discussion of the Incarnation. With him, we enter a Christocentric vision of salvation, considered independently of human sinfulness. *Our understandings of how we are saved change from issues of justice to those of generosity.* More importantly, we are led *to focus on the divine desire to be present with us.* Divine delight becomes a category within which we consider creation and the value of each being as pleasing to God. Within this category of divine delight, we understand the motivation behind the covenant, both with the People of Israel and in the

Incarnation. From this category, finally, we anticipate the glory that awaits us and how we might participate in divine life by imitating divine creativity.

It is against the *larger framework of divine delight* that I consider more carefully, in what follows, three aspects of Scotist thought in order to bring out how each integrates the intellectual with the spiritual in *a vision framed by love.* The most basic insight that Scotus presents about God is that the Trinity delights in itself, in the created order that reveals such beauty, and in the human heart that seeks to realize beauty in each of its choices. A vision of aesthetic delight—this is what Scotus offers us today. We can organize his insights spiritually around the importance of creation, the centrality of the covenant, and the goal of communion with one another and with God in love.

## The Value of the Created Order

*The created order is not a transparent medium through which divine light shines, but is itself endowed with an inner light that shines forth from within.*

No aspect appears more central to Franciscan spirituality than that expressed by Francis in the *Canticle to the Sun*. In affirming the value of creation and our relationship to it, we affirm the value of the contingent, the ephemeral. Affirming this value, we recognize the beauty of the present moment as it expresses the perfection of the eternal. In other words, the recognition of the value of

the contingent — the realm that does not have to exist or that could be other than it is — involves the affirmation of the value of divine desire and creative choice. God's choice to create this world, the one that surrounds us, is understood as a single choice that involved many (possibly an infinite number of) options. And yet, our world was chosen and created. One does not have to conclude that we are "the best world possible," but one would be foolish not to see in this the enormous love and delight of the Creator for the created. Since God is not only the source for creation, but also the Sustainer of all that is, the actual and present existence of what exists gives testimony of the ever-present and sustaining love of God for what has been made. God did not have to create in order to be God. Nothing about the divine essence required such generosity. The only thing required by the divine essence was that, if God did choose to create, God must remain God.

A second aspect revealed by the importance of the contingency of the created order is seen in the better-known Scotist affirmation of the primacy of each individual. Here is that *haecceitas*, the "thisness" so dear to the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. As created by God, each being is a "this," a *haec*, incapable of cloning or repetition, the ultimate reality of being, known fully to God alone. No human person is reducible to physical characteristics, genetic makeup, or DNA. The sacredness of each person, indeed of each being is philosophically expressed in this term *haecceitas*. *The created order is not a transparent medium through which divine light shines, but is itself endowed with an inner light that shines forth from within.*

## The Lamp

*Haecceitas* points to the ineffable within each being. The sacredness of each person, indeed of each being is philosophically expressed in this Latin term. According to Scotus, the created order is not best understood as a transparent medium through which divine light shines (as Aquinas taught), but is itself endowed with an inner light that shines forth from within.

The difference between these two great scholars can be compared to the difference between a window (Aquinas) and a lamp (Scotus).

Both give light, but the source of light for Scotus has already been given to the being by the creator. Each being within the created order already possesses an immanent dignity; it is already gifted by the loving Creator with sanctity beyond our ability to understand.

*Mary Beth Ingham CSJ. Scotus for Dunces. Pages 54-55.*



Finally, the dignity of the human person is expressed by Scotus in the natural powers of cognition and human rationality. We are not created independently of the natural order. Our powers of cognition and rationality are perfectly adjusted to the way the world is, because both the faculties of human reason and the ordered whole of creation are the result of the divine creative act. Unlike Aquinas, who speaks of only mediated access to the world around us, Scotus balances in his theory of knowledge both mediated and immediate access. His understanding of the requirements for the beatific vision necessitates a cognitional theory that already equips human reason with all that it needs to see God face to face. Thus Scotus believes that human reason possesses an intuitive cognition of the world that allows an immediate existential grasp of any existing reality.

As Scotus works out his explanation for this more immediate ability, he offers two reasons, both based on the dignity of the human. In the first place, it was part of Christ's rational grasp of the world around him and of the presence of his Father. In his humanity, Jesus mirrors our own human potential. In the second place, such a capacity is absolutely necessary for our experience of the beatific vision. In other words, if we are able to see God face to face, then our rational constitution must have what it takes and by nature. Scotus sees no need for the "light of glory" that Aquinas provides in order for the beatific vision to take place. *It belongs to human dignity, as currently created by God, to enjoy the relationship of communion that awaits us at the end of this life.*

## The Centrality of the Covenant

***As we move into a new millennium, we are in need of a renewed anthropology — a renewed vision of what it means to be human.***

Scotist thought offers a beautiful integration of biblical and doctrinal insights. At the foundation of his reflection upon God's relationship to the world and to us is the notion of the covenant initiated by God and fulfilled through the Incarnation. Salvation history is the large lens through which Scotus looks at what it means to be human: the call of Abraham, the revelation

to Moses, the Exodus, the centrality of Christ, and predestination of all to glory.

Perhaps the most original aspect of Scotist thought arises when he considers the reason behind the incarnation. Scotus affirms quite clearly that God would have become human *even if Adam and Eve had not sinned.*

Thus, the Incarnation is not a divine response to human sin as proposed by Anselm in the 11th century and widely held thereafter. Sin is not the center of our consideration of the covenant. If it were, he states, then we would rejoice at the misfortune of another. Rather, the Incarnation expresses the fullest communion of God-with-us. It is not sin, but Christ who is the center of our attention. This is not to deny sin or human weakness, but it is an important change of focus for Christian understanding. As we move into a new millennium, we are in need of a renewed anthropology — a renewed vision of what it means to be human. Scotus may offer the most fruitful medieval path in this reflection, for he consciously rejects an explanation of salvation that is founded upon a negative anthropology.

If the Incarnation took place as an event in history, not because of human sinfulness nor out of a need for divine retribution but as *the manifestation of divine desire to be with us*, then what might salvation really mean? Perhaps salvation involves neither justification nor retribution, but is the simple act of presence. If this is the case, then the celebration of Eucharist takes on a renewed meaning as a salvific act.

The notion of covenant grounds Scotus's understanding of moral living as relational living. In the revelation of the law to Moses we find both the articulation of the demands of the covenant and the basis for any social fabric. The moral foundation represented by the Decalogue reveals *the primacy of relational living* for Scotus. His is not primarily a divine command theory. The ten commandments reveal God's desire for us and point to the best way we can show our love for Him. Our relationship with God and with one another is strengthened by our choice to follow out of

love what God asks of us. But the law is not the final word and Scotus is not a legalistic thinker. *For him, love for God is the only unconditionally binding commandment.*

Moral living is also relational living within the human heart, where the two natural affections (for justice and for happiness) come together in the desire to love God above all things. Thus, moral goodness involves both a social dimension and an internal, spiritual experience of harmony and integration.

The joy and delight experienced by the good person reveals that the deepest human longing is fulfilled by right and ordered loving. This perfects our nature as rational beings made in God's image.

## The Insight about Communion

***In human moral development, we strive to unite the two moral affections (for happiness and for justice), and bring love for the self (happiness) into harmony with love for the good (justice). When we do this, we imitate divine goodness and simplicity. When we do not, we are simply not ourselves. This is what it means to sin.***

Finally, the relationship realized in the covenant contains a revelation about God as Triune relationship and as ground for the entire moral order. This is Scotus's way of expressing the key insight that "God is love." This truth expresses both the nature of God and grounds all choice. As Scotus states: "God is to be loved" is the foundational principle for all action, human as well as divine. His focus on the human will is really a focus on the power of love, the perfection of which reveals the fullest understanding of the human person as rational and as created in the image of God.

Here is, for me, the most important aspect of an accurate retrieval of Scotist thought. Today, rationality means the ability to think, to solve problems, to get the right answers, to get the result we desire. Rationality is tied to calculation, such that one wonders if computers are human since they can reason as we do and indeed even faster than we can!



The question of artificial intelligence as rational would amuse someone like Scotus, because his notion of rationality is much broader than the ability to analyze. He ties it to love and the human ability to choose to love the highest good, to be capable of self-control. Rationality has nothing to do with the human intellect, since this is merely a tool that serves in deliberation. Scotus's approach to the question of rationality begins with the will, that is, the human affective desire for union with God. *If the fullest development of the rational person involves love and communion, then the ability to think rightly is only a small part of a much larger picture of what it means to be human.*

Scotus states quite clearly that the intellect is only rational when it works with the will, that is, when it is informed by and serves the *activity of ordered loving*. It is so easy, he explains, to confuse the intellect with rationality, since at the first turn to introspection, we are distracted by the activity of intellectual reflection. This is what happened to Aristotle, and (he might add) to most philosophers. But one must reflect more deeply on one's experience to discover that it is not the intellect at all, but the will (seat of love) that holds the key to rational perfection. The will's natural

internal constitution defines rationality. There are within the will two distinct orientations: the first, directed toward its own preservation and wellbeing; the second, directed toward the highest good. Both orientations come together in God in a two-fold manner. First, in God alone do we find that being for whom love for the highest good is, in fact, identical to love for the self. Thus, every act of God reveals the unity of the divine essence and holds out the goal of rational perfection. In human moral development, we strive to unite the two moral affections (as he calls them) and bring love for the self into harmony with love for the good. When we do this, we imitate divine goodness and simplicity. When we do not, we are simply not ourselves. This is what it means to sin.

Finally, an aspect that comes out of a closer focus on love is the *role of beauty* as moral category and as a way of integrating the human moral journey into the spiritual journey. A moral aesthetic is, I think, quite Franciscan and could prove to be extremely timely for contemporary reflection. The focus on beauty in Scotist thought brings together divine and human orders of love. *In human moral choices, we seek to love the good. Scotus describes the morally good*

*act as a beautiful whole, a work of art in which all dimensions are in harmony.* This act and the morally good person are made even more beautiful by the presence of charity. Here Scotus moves from the order of moral goodness to the order of merit—a move from nature to grace. In the order of merit, the divine ear delights in the music of human goodness informed by love. The good act informed by charity stands at the boundary between the realm of human freedom and love and the realm of divine freedom and generosity. This is the entrance to deeper relationship made possible when God chooses freely to reward human actions far beyond what they deserve according to a strict justice.

## Challenge

As a non-Franciscan and, indeed, a non-theologian, I hope my reflections have helped to shed some light on a serious consideration of the rightful place of Franciscans in the scholarly community, and on the enormous intellectual legacy persons like Duns Scotus have left behind. They exalt the dignity of the human person centrality of Christ and the Incarnation enormous generosity of a God who has richly provided for all, Franciscans enjoy an aesthetic tradition. The world needs to hear this.

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