

Francis and Franciscan Spirituality
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FRANCIS AND FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY

To understand Franciscan spirituality we must begin with the spirituality of Francis himself, *il Poverello*, 'the little poor man' of Assisi. And to begin, we may again use some remarks from Martial Lekeux:

The life of the Poverello may seem more cheerful and more peaceful than that of some of the other saints. But the truth is that he was the saint of excesses: excess in sacrifice, excess in love: and it was by reason of his excesses that he held to the happy medium, because his disregard for moderation worked both ways, just as a scale insures better equilibrium the longer it is on both sides.

Francis is the saint of excesses and yet he is the saint with a smile, because he always fused the two. For him, penance was love, and sorrow 'perfect joy.' Using this standard, folly was wisdom and excess supreme moderation.¹⁴

We must make some sense of this 'excessive' saint if we wish to understand the beginnings and the permanent foundation of the Franciscan tradition. But understanding the tradition does not mean stopping with Francis. Otherwise we would have only the spirituality of an individual, not a 'tradition'. The word itself, from the Latin word for 'handing over', indicates that others received something from Francis. What was it? For his contemporaries, friends, companions, brothers and sisters, it was the experience of knowing Francis himself: he was the message. In a popular expression of the times, he taught them 'by word and example' (*verbo et exemplo*).¹⁵ And, by their own testimony, he was for them a living example of what he taught: He edified his listeners by his example as well as his words; 'he made his whole body a tongue'; 'more than someone who prayed, he had become prayer': these are some of the descriptions of Francis recalled by Thomas of Celano.¹⁶ That is, his whole person had become the message he was trying to communicate.

And what was that message? In a word, it was Jesus. To express it in such simple terms today may seem banal to us, or pious, or quaint. But for Francis, the discovery of Jesus, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ', was the ongoing revelation of his whole life in the twenty years after his conversion. In his early years he discovered Jesus as the one who led him among the lepers, and made their presence 'sweet' to him, rather than 'bitter'. He then discovered Jesus the preacher of conversion, announcing the reign of God. Over the years he began to see

more clearly Jesus as the incarnate Son of God at Bethlehem, then as the Suffering Servant on Calvary; and finally, 'the Lord' of all things, raised up in glory after his death. And in this Lord, the glorified Son, he also understood the trinitarian God.

It is through 'the Lord Jesus Christ' that Francis understands Mary, the Church, the Scriptures, priesthood, the poor, his brothers and sisters, and all creatures. It is ultimately through and in Jesus that Francis even understands himself. Though he seldom used the title 'Christ' by itself to refer to Jesus, his spirituality, and that of the Franciscan tradition after him, has been characterised as 'Christocentric'.

If there is one word which does complete justice to Franciscan theology and spirituality, it is 'Christocentric,' and they have this as their distinguishing feature, because the faith and holiness of St Francis were totally centered on Christ. In Jesus Christ the revelation is made to us of what the world, as a whole and in all its parts, means to God.¹⁷

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HOW HE ADMONISHED THE BROTHERS AND SENT THEM THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

¹⁸ Saint Francis, since he was already filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, predicted what would happen to his brothers. And calling together his six brothers in the woods next to the church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula where they often went to pray, he told them: "My dear brothers, let us consider our calling because God has mercifully called us not only for our own good but also for the salvation of many. Therefore, let us go through the world, encouraging and teaching men and women by word and example to do penance for their sins and to remember the Lord's commandments, which they have forgotten for such a long time."

He also told them: "Do not be afraid, little flock, [Lk 12:32](#) but have confidence in the Lord. And do not say among yourselves 'We are simple and illiterate men, how should we preach?' But be mindful of the Lord's words to his disciples: 'You yourselves will not be the

speakers; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you.' ¹ Mt 10:20 For the Lord Himself will give you spirit and wisdom to encourage and preach to men and their wives the way and deeds of the commandments. You will find, however, faithful people—meek, humble and kind—who will receive you and your words with joy and love. You will find others—unfaithful, proud, and blasphemous—resisting and criticizing you and your words. Therefore, resolve in your hearts to bear all these things with patience and humility."

When the brothers heard these words, they were afraid. Realizing that they were frightened, he told them: "Do not be frightened. Keep in mind that within a short time many learned, prudent and noble men will be with us. They will preach to nations and peoples, to kings and princes, and many people will be converted to the Lord. And the Lord will make His family grow and increase throughout the entire world."

After saying this, Francis blessed them and they went on their way.

Love, Rules, and Grace

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LOVE, RULES, AND GRACE

Our culture frequently exalts individual autonomy against community and tradition. This can lead to a suspicion of rules and norms that come from a tradition. This can also be a cause of a healthy criticism of a legalism that can arise from concentrating on rules and norms.

Advocates of Christian morality can sometimes lapse into a legalism that leads to an unproductive moralizing. There is no doubt that love has to be the essential foundation of the moral life. But just as essential in this earthly realm are rules and laws that show how love may be applied in real life. In heaven, love alone will suffice. In this world, we need moral guidance from the Commandments, the Sermon on the

Mount, the Precepts of the Church, and other rules to see how love works.

Love alone, set adrift from moral direction, can easily descend into sentimentality that puts us at the mercy of our feelings. Popular entertainment romanticizes love and tends to omit the difficult demands of the moral order.

In our permissive culture, love is sometimes so romanticized that it is separated from sacrifice. Because of this, tough moral choices cannot be faced. The absence of sacrificial love dooms the possibility of an authentic moral life.

Scripturally and theologically, the Christian moral life begins with a loving relationship with God, a covenant love made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. The Commandments and other moral rules are given to us as ways of protecting the values that foster love of God and others. They provide us with ways to express love, sometimes by forbidding whatever contradicts love.

The moral life requires grace. The *Catechism* speaks of this in terms of life in Christ and the inner presence of the Holy Spirit, actively enlightening our moral compass and supplying the spiritual strength to do the right thing. The grace that comes to us from Christ in the Spirit is as essential as love and rules and, in fact, makes love and keeping the rules possible.

Scripture Reflection

1 Timothy 6:3-19

³Whoever teaches something different and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the religious teaching ⁴is conceited, understanding nothing, and has a morbid disposition for arguments and verbal disputes. From these come envy, rivalry, insults, evil suspicions, ⁵and mutual friction among people with corrupted minds, who are deprived of the truth, supposing religion to be a means of gain. ⁶ Indeed, religion with contentment is a great gain. ⁷For we brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it.

⁸If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that. ⁹Those who want to be rich are falling into temptation and into a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge them into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹But you, man of God, avoid all this. Instead, pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. ¹²Compete well for the faith. Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called when you made the noble confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³I charge [you] before God, who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus, who gave testimony under Pontius Pilate for the noble confession, ¹⁴to keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ ¹⁵that the blessed and only ruler will make manifest at the proper time, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal power. Amen.

¹⁷Tell the rich in the present age not to be proud and not to rely on so uncertain a thing as wealth but rather on God, who richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment. ¹⁸Tell them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, ready to share, ¹⁹thus accumulating as treasure a good foundation for the future, so as to win the life that is true life.