

# 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  
Bonaventure Fest, 2003, Aston, PA



## The Spirituality of Francis of Assisi

Raoul Manselli

*Greyfriars Review*, April 1989, 43-55.



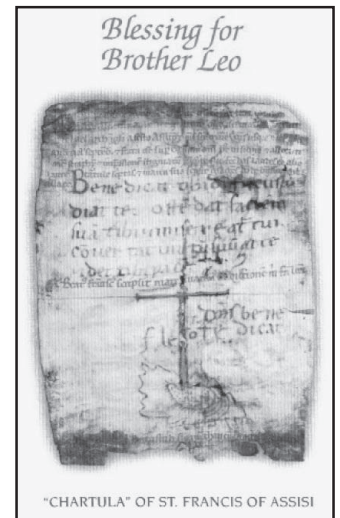
This biography presents Francis not as charismatic or as a man of the rule, but focused on his own times and in his relationship with his brothers. We have here a *synthesis of spirituality revealing an entire life experience*.

How does one begin to describe the spirituality of the Poverello, a man who has touched the lives of people for over eight centuries?

Decades later the question is still being debated as reflections and discussion of the uniqueness of Francis' spirituality gain importance.

Fortunately, we have a series of Francis' writings in which we can find the spirit of Francis himself, immediately and directly. In some, the intervening hands of scribes, secretaries, editorial additions, etc. can be perceived, as was the custom of the time, but the spirit is nonetheless authentically described. Four writings, however, have come forth undoubtedly without intermediaries, and it is through the lens of these writings that the description of Francis' spirituality will be analyzed. These are

- the PRAISES OF GOD,
- the BLESSING FOR BROTHER LEO, with the accompanying letter addressed to Brother Leo,
- the CANTICLE OF BROTHER SUN, and
- his TESTAMENT. They differ from each other in importance, from the lyrical beauty of the *Canticle* to the simplicity of the blessing to the exhortation of the *Testament*. Yet, they were left as a model for the lives of the brothers (and others as well) and a synthesis of spirituality revealing an entire life experience. Only continued prayerful reflection on these texts reveals their importance.



Although other writings which come from intermediaries are considered "official" insofar as they provide the opportunity of grasping the subjective moment in Francis' life, together with the four mentioned above, attention is given here to Francis' own consciousness of spirituality which he imparted to others. We begin with the "moment" of Francis' conversion as he himself remembers, "the encounter with the leper."

As Francis states in the *TESTAMENT*, the encounter is perceived as the primary fact and profound source of all that followed in his relationship with God. He states that the meeting with the leper caused the conversion: If one is a leper, all are lepers and we should feel as the leper felt. Reflection on this fact led him to probe deeply and grasp the awesome truth that our poorness, our shared status of lepers, if accepted, draws us closer to Jesus "who did not



*Francis & leper -- artist H. Schroeder*

*think equality with God was something to be grasped but emptied himself unto death, even the death of the cross.*" This truth of God's self-emptying love became a constant force in his relationship with God and with others. To understand the depth of this love calls for an imitation, in giving of oneself in love to all with whom one comes in contact. These sentiments of love for others, especially those in need, are seen to be very evident in two texts to Brother Leo; the *PRAISES OF GOD* together with the accompanying blessing and the *LETTER TO BROTHER LEO*, in which he comforts Brother Leo, experiencing an inner conflict, and invites him to come to Francis as if Francis were his "mother".

These two writings capture succinctly the overriding love Francis had for the poorest and most unfortunate persons from the stance of one who has shared and is sharing his status of marginalization. He feels close to them out of love and chooses to share their poverty (of all kinds), not as an end in itself, but in order to draw closer to Christ, even when this marginalization experience causes rejection such as he describes in the *PERFECT JOY* message.

However, Francis experienced a real dilemma in this passion for voluntary poverty for the sake of imitating Christ. He enjoyed a genuine freedom and joy contrary to many who had no choice or who chose poverty as an end in itself, such as the Waldensians and Cathari, who were

in a sense poorer than Francis since they lacked the joy of imitating and drawing closer to Christ.

Francis' spirituality, therefore, can be synthesized from what has been already said in one single direction: A love for men and women modeled on that of Christ crucified, the Incarnate God who came on earth to be poor among the poor. Through his positive view of suffering, misery and marginalization as the concrete situation of Christ's love and life, Francis gained a graced outlook on existence and on the universe, totally at odds with that of the Cathari.

Christ's love for humanity expressed through the Incarnation and death on the Cross comes with an equally positive outlook on the beauty of Creation as exalted and sung in the *CANTICLE OF BROTHER SUN* not only in its spiritual manifestation but in its physical and visual grandeur and beauty. Francis never experienced the universe symbolically but in its natural reality. For example, Brother Fire praises God because he is the one who lights up the earth in the darkness of night, and yet Francis had to feel his terrible sting when he underwent his painful cauterization.

In the *CANTICLE*, we pass directly to men and women who come to praise God only through peace and death. Painfully aware of the hatred and divisions of the time especially in his beloved Assisi, Francis sings and extols peace when God's will is recognized on earth and there is joy. At the



*Brother Fire, Piero Casentini, Assisi*

end of this life, well aware of his imminent death, he looks into the face of death, who he calls *SISTER* because her presence also contributes to the grandeur of God.

An interesting fact is noted in this discussion on Francis' spirituality and relationship to all creation. Although hagiographic tradition and artistic representations very frequently portray Francis with animals as one of Francis' most characteristic traits, there is not mention of animals in his own writings, while they are definitely mentioned in one of his companion's memoirs (1 Cel.85). There, speaking of Christmas, Francis says that if he could see the emperor, he would seek an edict by which everyone would have abundant food on that day. First of all he remembers the larks, then the ox and the ass, while noting "the poor ought to be fed by the rich". The emphasis is interesting in that it is an act of love. And Francis sees Christ-Incarnate as the center between God the Creator and the physical universe, human and animal. And so were "invented" the crib at *GRECCIO* and other things related to the humanity of Christ in order to feel him suffering on the cross as any human might suffer. To do this Francis and his followers used the richness found in religious poetry and art.

The importance of the Eucharist in Francis' spirituality is profound. For him the Eucharist in an extraordinary way actualizes the union between God, savior and redeemer, and the sinful human being who is underserving of any good thing yet who has the supreme blessing of seeing with his own eyes Christ as he is in the Eucharistic bread. Francis returns to this subject many times, drawing from it consequences of special significance in the area of spirituality. In his writings, he says we must preserve it with the greatest respect, showing toward it an acknowledgement of love and gratitude; we must respect the priests who have the power to consecrate the body of our Lord even though many priests at the time were not living exemplary lives. In all his teachings, Francis constantly focused on his beloved Christ who became incarnate to live intimately with us. Everything for Francis revolved around this truth and was also the reason for his obedience to the

*Behold, each day he humbles himself as when he came from the royal throne into the Virgin's womb; each day he himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day he comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest. As he revealed himself to the holy apostles in true flesh, so he reveals himself to us now in sacred bread.*

Admonition 1

*Let the whole world tremble, and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of the priest! ... Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before him!* A Letter to the Entire Order, 26,28



Church which provided the community in which Christ could be experienced.

From this attempted description of Francis' spirituality, it becomes again clear that this was not a Theology but rather a human sensibility which leads Christianity back to the heart of revelation without intermediary intellectuals. He was not opposed to learning, but it had to be subordinated to the soul's spiritual life as he indicated in LETTER TO ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA. The issue of how to integrate learning and professional ministry with one's spiritual development was to become a serious source of contention in the years following his death.

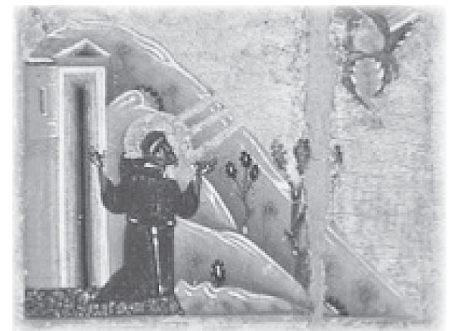
Reflection on the spirituality of Francis, however, cannot be limited to his own personal, subjective spiritual development but must include how it was received by his contemporaries. His earliest companions caught the contagion of his spirit, and it was embraced with joy within the "brotherhood", the fraternity. The use of the

term "brother", and soon after "sister", was not what it is used as today in describing religious life; all people, everywhere, were sisters and brothers. This was a dominant feeling among the early followers who did not join an already established order. They were the "Penitents from the city of Assisi". The hierarchy, however, had no confidence in him. They viewed his life as unreal. They dismissed his radical living for the sake of Christ, and, for the most part, offered no encouraging support for many years. Even those who looked with compassion on the fledgling group saw them as just another group trying to imitate the life of the early Christians with nothing original to offer in spirituality.

However, Francis' spirituality was new and is delightfully described in the "Jewel of Franciscan Spirituality", the *SACRUM COMMERCIIUM*. Here Francis' journey into God is described in terms taken from chivalry and explains Francis' early preaching. Just as a Knight would go through many adventures to win the hand of a fair lady, so would Francis and his follow-

ers to reach Lady Poverty. He compares his brothers to the "Knights of the Round Table" who conceal themselves in deserted places. This comparison struck and caught the imagination of the common people who all knew the stories of the knights' battles, celebrations, and the honors which followed successes. Francis, the "new fool", becomes the knight welcoming Lady Poverty and serving her a banquet of bread and water. Although his spirituality is grasped by popular culture, within the order for several reasons there arose some difficulty as to how to explain Francis and his spirituality in order to remove him from the typecasting of the "Founder of the Holy Order".

Two perspectives arise of Francis as "another Christ" connected with the stigmata and his life which was inspired by the life of Christ from the movement of his conversion, and as the "angel of the sixth seal" which developed at the end of the 13th century. These reflections lead further to the question: How did the spirituality of Francis become Franciscan spirituality?



*Stigmata. Bardi Dossal, Santa Croce, Florence*

Reflection on the life of Francis shows the gradual development of Francis, not as a great wonderworker but that of a life so Christ-like that it would eventually lose its human strength, though not entirely, because of the need to depend on Christ. This image would be developed through the efforts of his brothers and the faithful who would comb his writings and early memoirs, and rework and transform information into traditional Latin and vernacular. Francis thus emerges as one of the dominant figures in the spirituality of his time. The intellectual giants of the order, such as Alexander of Hales, John Peckham, and Bonaventure, would present him from the perspective of a theologian and philosopher in their theological reflections.



*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.*

A Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua

*Anthony Teaches Friars, Giotto, Assisi*

However, at the popular level, Francis remained as the saint who

- discovered and extolled the beauty of creation,
- the sanctity of life of everyone,
- the joy of existence, even in suffering.

In this manner, through his followers, he contributed to the elimination of Catherist heresy and the pauperism of the Waldensians, helping to animate Western Christianity.

When then are the aspects of Franciscan Spirituality seen through the lens of Francis himself? They are seen:

1. First of all, in the *humanity of Christ himself*, the incarnated God, to walk

in the footprints of Jesus in our own culture and to diffuse that spirit within the Church through our constant reflection and imitation. (Here we might be mindful of Clare's succinct prayer formula: Gaze, consider, contemplate, imitate.)

2. Secondly, to examine the *role of evangelical poverty* within our lives, always remembering poverty is not an end in itself but a means of letting go to be filled with Christ.
3. Thirdly, to grow in the *lived understanding of the Eucharist*, which Francis regarded as the Divine Presence directly available to our human sight. To share that understanding today is a great challenge just as it was in the time of Francis. He set up stumbling blocks

for his order, as well as for us, insofar as he set up his life as an example against all decadence, all unhealthy relaxation, all risk of crisis, not through theological tomes but simply from living from his heart, from falling in love with Christ and perceiving all life from that perspective.

Francis' spirituality is therefore not an abstract series of norms but the concrete expression of an intensely lived spirituality. This Franciscanism is a perennial returning to Francis in order to find new strength for the development and process of "becoming", of being a leaven which Francis released in the Church eight centuries ago. Francis' parting words to his brothers (and to us) are our challenge: "*I have done what the Spirit has called me to do. Now you must do what the Spirit has called you to do.*"

## The Spirituality of Francis of Assisi

By Raoul Manselli,

Synthesis provided by: Norma Rocklage OSF

**Raoul Manselli**, 1917-1984, Naples, Italy, lay scholar was considered one of the greatest Italian medievalists and perhaps Europeans of the twentieth century. At his untimely death in 1984 he left behind a remarkable scientific legacy.

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