

# 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  
Bonaventure Fest, 2003, Aston, PA



## Franciscan Spirituality and Christology

Michael J. Higgins TOR

### The Place of Christ in Franciscan Spirituality

Due to Francis' intense devotion to Jesus, Franciscan spirituality has often been described as profoundly Christocentric. Francis encountered in Jesus the fullest expression of the length that God was willing to go to reach out to all women and men and enter into relationship with them. The key moments of this Divine inbreaking were highlighted in the

- **Incarnation, Passion, and the Eucharist**
- **Crib, Cross and Chalice**

*There is nothing that shows more graphically the humility and the poverty which the Divine Word accepted in becoming incarnate than in the helplessness of infancy, the defenselessness of the crucifixion, and the silence of the Eucharist.*

Eric Doyle, OFM, and Damian McElrath, "St. Francis of Assisi and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan Life and Doctrine," in *Franciscan Christology*, ed. Damian McElraith (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1980), 10

The recreation of the first Christmas scene at Greccio, the intense love for the Eucharist, and the mystical events of a lonely retreat on LaVerna and the reception of the stigmata bear eloquent witness to Francis' tremendous devotion to Christ.



Stigmata (from Bardi Dossal 1245)

**However** the ordinary events of the Saint's life give us an even more profound insight into his spirituality.

## The Incarnation — Jesus Christ, the God-Man

God confirms the dignity of women and men not only in creating them in love and in the Divine image and likeness, but also, more forcibly, in the awe inspiring event of the Incarnation (cf. RegNB 23) . . . The Son *humbled Himself when he came from the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin* (Adm 1:16) This act of self-emptying had such a profound impact on Francis that he often could think of nothing else. (1Cel84) The fact that Christ *took*



When, some years ago, the astronauts circled the moon and sent back to us for the first time their view of this earth on which we eat and drink, work and sleep, plan and scheme, curse and pray, kill and cure, are born and die, we also got a glimpse for the first time, one could say, of how God sees the earth in all its smallness, significance and absurdity. As I watched the television it struck me with some force that the fundamental datum of the *Gospel mystery* is that the Someone we call God, dwelling in unapproachable light in God's awful Purity and terrible Holiness, who has been and is now adored, loved, worshipped, cursed and denied by millions of persons, actually entered human history some nineteen hundred years ago as a tiny baby and grew to mature personhood in a small corner of the planet I was gazing at on the television. In a flash I came to the conclusion that ***the Incarnation is a doctrine too fantastic to be false.***

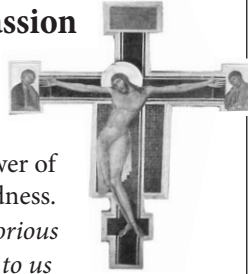
Eric Doyle OFM. *Clergy Review*,  
57:9 (1972): 864-5.

*the flesh of humanity and frailty* from the Virgin Mary and became human (2EpFid4) surprised and delighted Francis. He states that Christ did not take on only our human flesh, he took on our frailty as well — the fullness of what it means to be human, body and soul, with all the limits of the human condition.

### Christ in the Passion

The death of Jesus was for Francis the consequence of the irresistible power of Divine love and goodness.

*. . . the blessed and glorious Son, whom God gave to us and who was born for us, should, through his own blood, offer himself as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross; not for himself through whom all things were made, but for our sins, leaving us an example that we should follow in his footprints.* (2EpFid 11-13)



The self-emptying of Jesus, demonstrated most clearly in the Incarnation and his free choice of poverty, became the model of faith for Francis. He saw in Christ a man who embraced the Divine will in love, even to the point of dying on the cross, and he wanted to do the same.

### Christ in the Eucharist

In the Incarnation and Passion of Christ the love of God is demonstrated, the full dignity of humanity is shown, and men and women are given the opportunity to share in the fullness of Divine life and love. For Francis, this Divine favor

continues in the Eucharist, which is nothing less than a continuation of the Incarnation and the ongoing fruit of the Passion. It is the very image of Christ among us.

. . . Through participation in the sacrament, men and women become united with Christ, share intimately in the love and saving power of God, and are connected more deeply with all of creation.

### The Christocentric Nature of Franciscan Theology

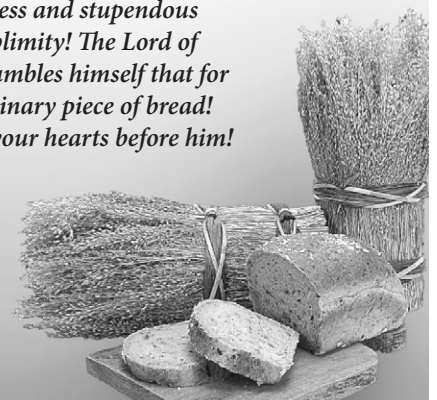
Francis was such a popular figure in his own time and down through the ages that it is easy to see how his experience of God gave birth to a *uniquely "Franciscan" way of doing theology*. A theology which preoccupied itself primarily with the place of Christ in human life and in creation and with God's activity in all parts of creation through love and grace.

In a word, Christ always and everywhere led him to God. Franciscan theologians, influenced and guided by the example of the Poverello, struggled to give sound theological expression to the centrality of Christ —

- the One sent by God into the world because of Divine love,
- the One who was the model and channel of creation,
- the One who established the possibility of salvation through the redemptive power of the Paschal Mystery, and
- the One who remains with his people always in the Eucharist.

*Let everyone be struck with fear, 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 a priest! O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation he hides himself under an ordinary piece of bread! Look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before him! Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by him! Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that he who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally!*

(Ep Ord 26-29)



With the force of his very being, in his actions and preaching, Jesus revealed and pointed the way to God, the Most High. Franciscan theologians, from Alexander of Hales to Duns Scotus, used this *Christocentric* vision as a point of departure in their own speculative theologizing about the mystery of God.

For Francis, the experience of God in and through the person of Christ, which expressed the reality of God as the **Supreme Good**, characterized his spirituality. However, the Poverello was not a theologian and never wrote about his experience in a theological or systematic way. This is certainly not the case with **Bonaventure**. Influenced by Francis, Bonaventure developed a theology that is highly Trinitarian and Christocentric while maintaining a distinctly “Franciscan: flavor based on the love and goodness of God.”

Christ is the exemplar of all that it means to be holy and the fullest example of what it means to live a moral life. *Christ is the blueprint, the form, or the inspiring image that God uses as a model in molding every part of creation*  
William Short OFM, *The Franciscans*, (Phoenix, AZ: TAU Publishers, 2012) 120.



Duns Scotus (1266 – 1308) is the Franciscan theologian who best expressed theologically what was implicit in the spirituality of St. Francis: *the centrality of Christ in all of creation and the dignity of women and men*. He presented Christ as the unique key through which all of the created universe, especially women and men who are called to participate in Divine life itself, can be interpreted. . . . In the reality of Christ’s human existence, humanity itself is elevated to an immeasurable dignity. Christ is the “first” absolute in the Divine plan and greater by far than any imperfection caused by human sinfulness

The very life of God is one of goodness itself expressing itself generously, fully. God’s desire to share goodness is expressed as creation. . . . Creation is fully understandable at the *birth of Jesus*. Here is the “missing link,” always present, now visible . . . Christ is no alien in a strange universe: he was from the beginning the reason and the *Creator’s blueprint for every particle of matter*, for all things visible and invisible, for everything and everyone.



*Everything was made in him, and without him was made nothing of that which was made. (Prologue of John’s Gospel)*

God’s complete generosity is revealed in the Incarnation — nothing is held back. The religious world that humans develop cannot contain this mystery: God does not come as an angel, or a burst of light, nor even as an Idea or a vision — **God comes as a baby!**

William Short OFM, *The Franciscans*. (Phoenix, AZ: Tau Publishers, 2012). See whole chapter, *The Franciscan Spirit*. Pp.119-153.

or imperfection. Thus, *even if Adam had not sinned, the Word of God most definitely would have become Incarnate in the God-man, Jesus Christ.*



William Short presents this wonderful image of Scotus’ position: The Incarnation of the Word is the highest good, the supreme expression of God’s

love. By comparison with the infinity of love revealed in the Incarnation, Adam’s sin and correcting its effects appear as a lesser good. (To use a metaphor, why build the Taj Mahal to cover a pothole?)

William Short OFM, *The Franciscans* (Phoenix, AZ: TAU Publishers, 2012), 120.

In essence, then, the universe is not sin-centered, but rather Christ-centered. Further, since God created all things through Christ, every being and every aspect of creation ultimately finds its reason *for existence in him*. “The human nature of Christ is the motif the Divine Architect was to carry out in the rest of creation. . . . The whole universe is full of Christ.” (Alan B. Wolter, “John Duns Scotus on the Primacy and Personality of Christ,” *Franciscan Christology*, 141) As every point in the circumstance of a circle is defined by its distance from the center of the circle, so every facet of creation can define itself only in relation to Christ, the center of all.

The Incarnational thrust within Scotus’ thought defines it as a specifically Christian view of reality. Jesus Christ stands at the center of the Scotistic universe as the fullness of human nature in union with God. *Scotistic thought centers around the importance of each person and the unique dignity of each human act and of each human life*. Salvation history recounts the story of concrete and contingent events in which God freely chose to enter the unfolding of a particular human life. *Each life, each moment, then, offers an opportunity for the discovery of the value and dignity each one of us holds in the eyes of God.*



Mary Elizabeth Ingham CSJ, “John Duns Scotus: An Integrated Vision,” in *The History of Franciscan Theology*, ed., Kenan B. Osborne OFM, (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1994), 227

***We believe that the greatest work of God, the Incarnation, was not dependent on human fallenness, but was God’s purpose before the foundation of the world.***

## Summary Points

### All of human existence is set against the backdrop of love.

The basis for the grandeur and dignity of humanity is grounded in Francis' conviction that

- women and men are beings created by God,
- created in the image and likeness of God, and
- Redeemed through the instrumentality of the Incarnation.

All of human existence is set against the backdrop of love. God, who is love, created men and women through love for love. Human existence is, in a very real sense, an incarnation of the love of God and a consequence of Divine love. Every man and woman, then, is an incarnation of God.

One important implication of this Franciscan vision of human existence is this: *if we are indeed made in the image of Christ, both in our physical and spiritual dimensions, then the more human we become the more Christ-like we become.* Therefore, holiness does not consist in the denial of humanity and everything that makes up who we are as humans. ***Rather, it is found precisely in the embrace of our humanity.***

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Michael J. Higgins TOR

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