

St. Francis and His Approach to Divinity

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This segment on St Francis and his approach to Divinity is based on the work of our brother Benedetto Lino, OFS, coordinator of the Formation Commission of our International Presidency.

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Part 1: A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Spirituality

Spirituality is based on one's unique experience of God.

"...the spirituality of any saint is his particular way of picturing God to himself, of speaking of Him, of approaching Him, of dealing with Him. Every Saint has his/her own unique way of contemplating the Mystery of God, and this approach to the Divine gives rise to a specific understanding and hence spirituality." In our brief study, the spirituality we are most concerned with is that of St. Francis and its development by the early masters of the young Franciscan Order.

I must pause for a moment to say that the Catholic Church is richly blessed with a number of excellent spiritualities, or ways/paths traveled to approach God. All are good and are focused toward the same end, namely God Himself. But all of them do not follow the same path in this approach to God our Father. This section is aimed to help you discern if the Franciscan Way of Life is the best match for your journey toward God. The process will require some understanding of our unique Franciscan spirituality and your prayer and discernment to see if this is truly your vocation, to approach God in the manner of St. Francis.

The Franciscan experience will require us first to look at God through the eyes and insights of St Francis and the early Franciscans to gain an understanding of God as Trinity, focusing on the "Primacy of the Father". Next is Francis' image and understanding of Jesus and lastly how we are called into a special relationship with our loving God.

Where Francis begins to differ from other saints/founders, is in his approach to Jesus. Where most seek to emulate one or more aspects of Jesus' life, Francis becomes totally immersed in the reality of "all" of Jesus. Ultimately, the spiritual goal of a Franciscan is to struggle to become a total imitator of Jesus, to become "alter Christus" (another Christ) touching all of God's creation as Jesus did. This is no small goal or challenge, but a path that will ask you to look deeply into how you set your life's priorities, and how you live them out day to day.

This fundamental concept was wonderfully expressed by the Cardinal R. Etchegaray, in his sermon on the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the Franciscans, on April 9, 2000: *"The Franciscan charisma has never been more present offering the total Christ to a broken world that is afraid of a united brotherhood of all men without exclusion."*

And this task is also up to us, Secular Franciscans:

“The world needs this Franciscan spirit, this Franciscan vision of life. It is expected that you, beloved children, know it deeply, love it with passion, above all that you live it with the perfection that your state allows.” (Pius XII, To the Secular Franciscans of Italy, 1st July 1956).¹

Spirituality is born and strengthened by a continuous personal relationship with God

If you look at the life of St. Francis and even read accounts of the early brothers (also includes St. Clare and her Poor Ladies), it becomes evident that they spent a good amount of time deliberately building relationship with God and one another. Contemplating the goodness of God was not relegated to a few minutes when available, or just on Sunday, but this prayerful contemplation formed the foundation of all they did and became. It began the day and served as a spontaneous expression of joy when they came back together to share the wonders God enabled them to do. [Don't think great miracles for the word “wonder”; think a kind word or smile or gesture of forgiveness freely given to someone you can't stand. A similar concept today might be “random acts of kindness” but done all the time to all you meet].

This time of being “alone” with God is essential to fully live the Franciscan spirit. To build relationship with anyone takes time, effort and presence, and that also includes relationship with God. If we are willing to constantly make the effort, the Holy Spirit will lead us to the relationship we seek, and for the Franciscan effect the peace and joy we need to love and serve all God's creation, simply because it is God's and it is good.

So how did Francis envision and experience God and put this insight into practice in his daily life?

FRANCIS, TRINITARIAN MAN

Every approach to God must be through Jesus. Christ is the way, He told it to us. No one knows the Father except the Son and he to whom He wants to reveal Him. (Lc 10, 22).

While Francis desired to imitate Jesus as far as humanly possible [often called being Christo-centric or centered on Christ], Francis viewed Jesus as the only true way to approach the Father. It is this ultimate relationship with the Father that compels and attracts Francis, to be loved by the Father as deeply as the Father loves the Son.

Francis yearns for relationship with the Father. The Father is the goal of all Francis' desires. As Jesus is the Beloved Son, Francis strives to conform himself to the image of

¹ Be careful, however, not to fall into or nourish an unfounded sense of superiority that, would be radically contrary to being “Franciscan” and above all to the thought and life of Francis.

Jesus so he might realize that he is also a beloved son and experience as much as possible the wonder of the Father's love.

God, the Father, gives full meaning to his life and Francis turns to Him with trust, familiarity, astonishment and thankfulness, being fully aware of his smallness and unworthiness. On the contrary, it is exactly this awareness (that God loves him in spite of his "unworthiness") that makes him burn with an ever greater love, with a more determined desire to join Him.

Francis has difficulty believing that God loves him so much that He is willing to give all through His Son, and he wants to reciprocate this love, offering himself completely, *like the Son*, to join in total conformation/unity with Him.

Since Francis understands that the Holy Spirit is the source of power and inspiration that opens our hearts to relationship with the Father (and the Trinity), Francis pursues a vital relationship with all three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity, that are distinguishable but never separate and to whom he turns because singularly they transform him, in order for him to live his relationship of love in the heart of the Life, the perfect Trinity and simple Unity of God to the fullest.

THE THEOLOGY OF FRANCIS

When we read the written documents of Francis, we run into **God's** omnipresence on each page. Designated by His name (219 times) or by that, more frequent, of **Lord** (364 times), God is the central reality, from whom everything draws origin and toward which everything is oriented.

God is always understood and proclaimed in a Trinitarian perspective. The proclamation of the Trinity is not an empty theoretical formula: Francis presents the internal divine union insisting on the pre-eminence of the Father, who is always in the first place. Francis' most common expression for God is "Perfect Trinity and Simple Unity," and this is the reality Francis charges all his family to recognize and hold dear in all they do.

"Fear and honor, praise and consecrate, thank and adore the omnipotent Lord God in the Trinity and in the unity, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, creator of all the things" (Rnb 21, 2: FF 55).

It is this expression "*perfect Trinity and simple unity*" that reveals in Francis the deep intuition of the otherness that characterizes the relationship between the divine Persons that, however, does not call into question their "simple unity": the perfect difference exists in the

bosom of total unity. Otherness always focuses one on the complete care of the other, never acting for self, and it is this understanding that will ultimately found the Franciscan family, not on hierarchy of authority, but on the foundation we call littleness and fraternity [the desire to be a servant of everyone else, focusing on the other and thereby being a more effective imitator of Jesus, who came not to be served, but to serve!]

THE PRIMACY OF THE FATHER

In his approach to the Trinity, Francis always reserves **the central place for the person of the Father.**

In the majority of his writings and prayers Francis focuses on the Father, for example in the act of thanksgiving in chapter 23 of the Earlier Rule, he calls Him: “Holy and just father”, (John 17, 11-25), “Lord of heaven and earth” (Mt 11, 25), uniting the titles that Jesus gives to God in the two Gospels. More or less the same words are repeated in the Praise of the God Most High: “Holy father, king of heaven and earth” (Lod Al 2: FF 261).

In the first Admonition Francis brings us back constantly to the relationship between the Father and the Son, that “Father who lives in an inaccessible light” and who can only be seen in the Spirit (Am I, 5-7: FF 141).

Also the concluding prayer of the Letter to the Whole Order (FF 233), even without naming the Father, speaks about the beloved Son and about the Spirit, which leads man to “the Most High, who lives and reigns gloriously in the perfect Trinity and in simple unity.”

In analyzing all of the documents written by Francis, “Father” (attributed to God) is used 97 times.

This relationship of Francis with the Father, his basic longing, is also his gift (his charism: he experienced the grace of feeling like a son). These are points of reference that are essential in understanding the central importance of *fraternity* for Francis.

Unlike other orders, Francis did not want to hear himself be called “Father” (he preferred brother Francis) because he understood the Father as singular and referring only to our heavenly Father. Francis desired to be a perfect disciple of Christ, in whom we do not recognize “paternal” attitudes but rather “filial” and “brotherly” ones. Jesus teaches us the perfect prayer, which is directed to the Father, His and ours.

In his most beautiful *Paraphrase of the Our Father* (FF 266-275), Francis asserts that “our most holy Father, light, love and highest good” already reigns “in the angels and in the saints,” giving them full knowledge, setting them on fire with love and filling them with happiness. As for us, we ask that his name be sanctified, that it grow and bring fulfillment in us of the full knowledge of the “width, length, height and depth” of his mystery as a Father, which still escapes us. Only when the Father “calls us to his Kingdom”, will we finally have “a clear vision, a perfect love, a blest company, an eternal joy” of Him.

Therefore, when Francis prays, as the Son has taught him, he addresses himself to the Father: out of his 15 prayers, 11 are directed to the Father, 2 to Jesus, and 2 praise the Blessed Mother (T. Matura, op. cit).

The Father is at the center of the Trinity, source of every action and to whom everything returns: nothing summarizes this vision better than the final prayer of the Letter to the Whole Order (FF 233):

“Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, grant us in our misery that we may do for your sake alone (propter temetipsum), what we know you want us to do, and always want what pleases you;

so that, cleansed and enlightened interiorly and fired with the ardor of the Holy Spirit, we may be able to follow in the footsteps of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and so make our way to you, Most High, by your grace alone, you who live and reign in perfect Trinity and simple Unity, and are glorified, God all-powerful, forever and ever.”

Our experience or vision of the Father may be nonexistent or minimal, though we regularly say the prayer that Jesus taught us. We often settle for prayers or devotions to Mary and the saints [good if they bring us to Jesus and foster our desire for relationship with the Father] because we feel them more approachable than the Father.

The Franciscan approach is to use all prayer to lead us to imitate Jesus for the purpose of entering and deepening our relationship with Our Father, the source of Love unimaginable.

As “Franciscans“, we must re-discover the “Father,” and reconnect, establishing a truly vital relationship with Him in order “to convert ourselves” into authentic “Trinitarian” men and women, like Francis: to reach out to the Father, through and with the Son, by means of the grace of the Holy Spirit.²

² A splendid treatment of Paternity and the Paternity of God as essential elements of the spirituality of the Secular Franciscan is found in “The Spirituality of the Secular Franciscan,” Cristoforo Piacitelli OFM, Printed, 2008, pages 61-73.

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF FRANCIS

The Christology of Francis is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Trinity, and therefore this Christo-centrism of Francis is based fully on his understanding of the Trinity.

Only through Jesus, the *way*, can we "see", and come to know the Father (John 14, 9), otherwise inaccessible, and be joined to Him in unity.

Only by following Jesus can we enter into an authentic intimate and vital relationship with the Father.

Francis rediscovers the Christ who offered EVERYTHING to EVERYONE in order to lead everything and everyone to the Father who is at the heart of the Trinity. His union with Christ becomes ever more intimate until it becomes a total conformation in every sense on LaVerna.

In his *Letter to the faithful* Francis leaves us a testimony of this intimacy that he experienced, when he describes it by means of the figures of the most intimate family relationship -- brothers, spouses, mothers, declaring without hesitation that this is not a project for a few chosen ones but **for all** who will put themselves sincerely on the road to conversion - penance.

The Christology of Francis focuses on the divine dimension of the Word, "The Most High Lord, God of the universe", and leads Francis to a descending Christology that emphasizes strongly the humbleness and the poverty of the Incarnation and of the Eucharist. Humility and Poverty will become the hallmarks of all of Franciscan Spirituality, and it will become necessary to understand that the actions of God, which we often call unconditional love, also show God's poverty and humility or His desire to be in relationship with us His creatures.

God is fully complete within God's self, yet by choice God desires to be in relationship with us, not as Lord and Master, but as a Lover with His beloved. This unimaginable invitation to love is another characteristic of Franciscan Spirituality. Atonement for the sin of Adam is not at the heart of our Tradition, the Love of the Father is.

Francis and later Franciscan tradition revolve around the actions of the Trinity as driven by love, the choice to love and desire to be loved.

In an act of love and supreme poverty and humility Jesus, the Beloved Son of the eternal Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the womb of the Blessed Mother, takes on all the frailty of our humanity, just to show us the face of the Father.

The Incarnation then for Francis becomes the first moment of experiencing the greatest love possible and becomes the one single and most important event in all human history. God is physically with us as one of us, able to touch and be touched and showing us our salvation.

God's love continues without condition all the way to the cross, where not even life is more precious than the continued outpouring of unconditional love which does not fade in the face of diversity.

Francis does not write about or focus on the Cross, which is most unusual for Medieval theology and in many cases today's theology. Francis instead continues to dwell on God's poverty and humility and desire to remain with us, hidden within the Eucharist. The Eucharist is God's action to continue to love and nourish us, giving us Himself, in the poorest and humblest form of food, bread and wine, (our food and drink.)

As in the Gospel of John, where we find Jesus kneeling at and washing our dirty feet, again he humbles Himself through the example of simple service to others. Jesus completes the action of God's love through another gesture of loving humility, choosing to remain with us in the Eucharist.

Jesus, God the Son, second person of the Blessed Trinity, the Beloved Son, Our Elder Brother [St. Francis' expression for Jesus], who gave up the benefits of divinity to become human, and who gave his life to reveal to us the depths of the Father's love, shows us more than just the face of the Father.

Jesus reveals to us the very nature of the Trinity and the Gracious Mystery that patiently waits for us to respond to the Father's invitation to find love and all fulfillment in Him.

For Francis, as in the Creed of the Church, the Christ-event is lived practically in its entirety in everyday life. Jesus' life emphasizes for us all, the supreme expression of the love of God and reveals in his total offering of himself through his death on the cross, that his own essence and being are inseparable from the Father.

For this reason, the Eucharist has particular importance for Francis (a supreme concrete expression of the love of the Father for his creatures and of the revelation of his essence), in which the true encounter with God and his creation is achieved in all dimensions of existence, human and spiritual ("*... the Spirit of the Lord, who lives in his faithful, is He who receives the most holy Body and the Blood of the Lord*" and "*... in such a way the Lord is always present with his faithful ...*", *Admonition I*).

Because of the Eucharist Francis held a special reverence for priests everywhere, not based on their worthiness, but on their faculty to make the presence of Jesus real in the Eucharist. This special gift of "understanding" established the church as a basic value, and he recognized that there is no Church without the Body of Christ, and there is no Body of Christ if there are no priests. It also recognizes that this Church is not composed only of clergymen: it is the people of God in all their functions and social conditions. It is this reality of Church stemming from the Eucharist that causes Francis to place all parts of his spiritual family at the service of the Church, to carry out the mission of proclaiming the Gospel.

Given the numerous movements of his day, most of which became antagonistic to the clergy, Francis' insight kept his family firmly within and at the service of the Church. Today unlike many "Third Orders" the Secular Franciscan Order is and remains directly

linked to the Holy See and our guiding documents and interpretation of our Rule for modern times remain a function of the Holy See.

Following this brief primer on Franciscan Spirituality as Trinitarian and Christological, it would be a good time to reflect and discuss how this view or approach to God either fits or does not fit our own vocational call.

Let us meditate on the Rule and the General Constitutions which exhort us (GC art. 12, 1, 2 and 3 and the Rule of the SFO 1978 C2 Art 8 & 10):

Article 12

- Gaining inspiration from the example and the writings of Francis and, above all, filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, each day the brothers and sisters faithfully live the great gift which Christ has given: the revelation of the Father. They should bear witness to this faith before all:

- in their family life;
- in their work;
- in their joys and sufferings;
- in their associations with all men and women, brothers and sisters of the same Father;
- in their presence and participation in the life of society;
- in their fraternal relationships with all creatures.

1. Uniting themselves to the redemptive obedience of Jesus, who placed His will into the Father's hands, let them faithfully fulfill the duties proper to their various circumstances of life. Let them also follow the poor and crucified Christ, witness to Him even in difficulties and persecutions.

2. As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ.

Discussion:

1. What type of relationship do I have with the Father?
2. Look at your prayer life, to whom do you most often pray?
3. How would you currently describe your own spirituality?
4. Describe your feelings when you hear God is poor and humble!
5. What does the Incarnation and Eucharist express to you about God?

Part 2 Fundamentals of Franciscan Theology

The God who reveals Himself

The first concept I want you to understand is “kenosis” meaning self-emptying (self-giving). It is essential for all Christians and especially for us Franciscans to understand this idea. As an aside I want to insert the meaning of kenosis as understood by Bonaventure, as I think it more to the point and understandable for us today. Kenosis is the complete total and unconditional “self-giving” of all God is (and by extension it is our challenge also) for the good/well-being of the other. (N.B. remember that the highest “good” is defined as love).

“There is no greater love than this: to give His life for his friends.” (John 15, 13). The key words are: “to give His life” and “friends”.

What greater sacrifice or gift can one give than life itself, that the other, the one who is loved might thrive? Giving your life is in fact the gift of everything. God has revealed to us that we have been created in His image and likeness³ and that our fundamental nature is created to love and be loved. All are called to love everything and everyone completely, also our enemies. (John 13, 34; 15, 17; Mt 5, 44; Luke 6, 27 and 35; Romans 5, 8).

From St Paul in the beautiful hymn at the beginning of Philippians we hear the following:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in his very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing (kenosis = emptied himself), taking the very nature of a servant, he appeared in human form. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2, 5-8)

Pope Benedict XVI amplifies St Paul’s words by saying: “The love of God for us, initiated with the creation, became visible in the mystery of the Cross, in that kenosis of God, in that emptying and humiliating debasement of the Son about whom we have heard proclaimed by the apostle Paul in the magnificent hymn to Christ in the Letter to the Philippians.

³ In every creature, animate and inanimate there is the imprint and substance of God, who in His Son, he has created us in His image and likeness from all eternity (Adm. V, FF 153,...he has created and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the *body* and *similar* to Him according to the *spirit*). Everything is, therefore, by its birth essentially “lovable” and gives love because it comes from God and is loved by Him.

Yes, the Cross reveals the fullness of the love of God for us. A crucified love, that does not stop with the scandal of Holy Friday, but culminates in the joy of the Resurrection and Ascension to heaven and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, Spirit of love through whom sins will be forgiven and forgiveness and peace will be granted. . . In fact, while it is love that offers to man everything that God is (...), it is also a love where the very heart of God, the Omnipotent one, awaits the 'yes' from his creatures (...)⁴."

St. Francis knew well and understood this self-giving on God's part, extending to all of us an eternal unconditional love : the self-emptying we call the Incarnation where Jesus descends from the heart of the Trinity and takes on our complete humanity; the self-emptying on the cross where Jesus gives up the precious gift of life so we might know just how consumed God is for love of us. There is nothing God would hold back (of Himself, for Himself) out of love for each one of us.

And lastly in the Eucharist, God continues to stoop down even lower that we might be able to see and respond to His great love for us.

Oh admirable Highness, oh wonderful condescension! Oh sublime humbleness! Oh humble sublimity, that the Lord of the universe, God and Son of God, lowers himself down so much even to hiding himself, for our salvation, under the tiny piece of bread!

Admire, brothers (and sisters), God's humility and open your hearts to Him!

Be humble, as well, and you will be exalted by Him.

Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves, so that you are completely received by The one who completely offers himself to you." (St. Francis, Letter to the whole Order)

This self-giving is God's eternal action of offering everything He is to be in a loving relationship with us, His creatures. We are, each one of us, the apple of God's eye, the object of His love, the one God has called into being to be in relationship with Him for all eternity. This is kenosis!

Francis identified this self-emptying of God on our behalf as the "poverty of God," discussed by St. Paul in 2Cor 8, 9⁵, and adopted by Francis as a motivation for his choice of radical poverty for himself and for his followers. The poverty of Francis, then, is first of all "conforming to the poor Christ." This expression was his way to understand and respond

⁴ Sermon, celebration of penance, youth in preparation XXII GMG, Rome, on March 29 2007

⁵ "You know, in fact, the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ: from rich as he was, he became poor for you, because you became rich by means of his poverty."

to the fullness of the love God showers on us without reservation. A God, who in His Son became humble and poor out of love for us. Radical poverty became Francis' solution to be able to respond to God's love as fully as he was humanly able, to remove any and everything that might come between himself and his ability to respond to the Love of the Father.

This experience of the humble and poor Jesus Christ, the revelation of humility and of poverty, of the love of God and the road to a humble and poor answer to such love on the part of man, is the insight and response on which Francis' life is based, and that will guide everything he does up to the end of his earthly life.

It is this that constitutes the typically Franciscan characteristic of the experience of God, of man, of the world.

The encounter of love between God and Francis (God who loves without condition, and who desires to be loved back, and Francis who loves Him back with all his being in the astonishment of being loved by the Highest God) is the living representation of the realization of God's eternal plan for every man and woman, as it was for Francis.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this primer, there are many spiritualities fully accepted by the Church. Most have their focus on the salvific action of God through Jesus' actions as expiation for sin [Doctrine of Atonement]. This is contained in the writings of St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, in his writing "Cur Deus Homo" (Why the God-Man?) and it forms the basis of many schools of theology. This over the centuries became the primary theology of the Church.

But there is a fully accepted alternate theology, just as old, that survives today in the Franciscan Family.

For Francis, instead, Jesus in his humble, poor kenotic form of existence, is the revelation of the humble God.⁶ The alternate theology of the Franciscan school kept alive the radical love-centered image of God.

In his work on the Primacy of Christ, Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus firmly rooted the Franciscan Family in understanding that God's plan is based solely on Love and the Incarnation was always God's plan [desire] to share Himself with us. This is the reality intuited by Francis.

The ultimate result of this movement away from the primary theology in the Church defines the Incarnation as the original intention/plan of God for all creation. The Incarnation is too important an event to suggest that something man has done or failed to do could influence God's intent to love and be loved.

⁶ G. Iammarrone, Franciscan Spirituality, page 50

Original sin is not the reason for the presence of God-with-us in human reality and history (Incarnation), God's love and free choice is!

The focus of all of God's self-emptying actions is to draw us into a freely chosen relationship with the Trinity, cooperating with the Spirit to lead us to Jesus, imitating Jesus who is our elder Brother and the beloved Son of the Father, and to allow Jesus and the Spirit to lead us into relationship with the Father.

Yet there is a challenge here, especially for us Secular Franciscans. In coming to understand this great love and invitation to share in it, we are charged to live in the world in a way that reflects this great love. Love is only love when it is given away and the more love that is shared, the greater abundance we will receive.

It is a hard challenge, because as people we often refuse to see the image of God in the "other" and therefore we refuse to love [think "take up our cross"]. We are not called to love just family and friends or maybe God, we are called to be love, and to live so that love shines in the darkness.

This is the insight that Francis came to understand, to believe and to live with every fiber of his being. Did he fail sometimes? I am sure he did, being as human as the rest of us. But the important thing is the desire to live our lives in constant conversion (metanoia), day after day trying to be just a bit more open to receive love and to respond with love.

The first article of our Rule⁷ charges us to follow Jesus in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi, making present our charism in the life and mission of the Church. How do we make this consecrated lifestyle present in our world today?

⁷ Rule of 1978 approved by Pope Paul VI

Discussion:

1. How do you imitate Jesus in your life?
2. Explain the poverty and humility of God!
3. What is your image of God?
4. Father?
5. Son?
6. Spirit?
7. How does Franciscan theology differ from other theologies within the Church?
8. What do you feel about it?
9. How is our focus different?
10. How might this difference alter our perception about God?