

...the source of Franciscan transformation...

## Franciscan Spirituality

Franciscan spirituality finds its source in the life, experience and vision of Saint Francis of Assisi. The very first place we must look to discover this authentic vision is in his prayers and writings because it is there we find the fountain source in which to begin our search. As we study his writings what becomes absolute clear is the overwhelming Trinitarian and Marian vision of the little poor man of Assisi.

The Trinity is the great Christian revelation. It is this which sets us beyond all other faiths. God is not only One; God is Three Divine Persons in One God. It is essentially in this revelation that the Catholic Church claims to have the fullness of the faith. We profess the Trinity as Catholics every time we make the sign of the Cross. The Trinitarian vision of Saint Francis of Assisi is clearly expressed in the prayer he added at the very end of his, Letter to the Entire Order.<sup>1</sup>

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God,  
grant us in our misery the grace  
to do for You alone  
what we know You want us to do,  
and always to desire what pleases You.  
Thus, inwardly cleansed,  
interiorly enlightened,  
and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,  
may we be able to follow in the footprints  
of Your beloved Son,  
our Lord Jesus Christ.  
And, by Your grace alone,  
may we make our way to You,  
Most High,  
Who live and rule  
in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,  
and are glorified God all-powerful  
forever and ever.  
Amen.

Written at the end of his life, it shows the wonderful balance Saint Francis achieved, through cooperation with grace at work in his life. He gives us the secret of his life by showing us how the Trinity worked in his own transformation. Deconstructing this prayer we learn that having been “inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened, and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit” he was able “to follow in the footprints of” Jesus the “beloved Son”. “And, by... grace alone” make his way to God, Most High.

In this prayer Saint Francis, explains<sup>2</sup> the holy manner in which the Trinity works together to transform us into true Christians. But here we have the end of the journey, the clarity of vision, a new image of Christ presented to us in Saint Francis’ seraphic love for Christ crucified. We need to go back to the beginning to see the start of the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Ep.Ord. 50-52. The date suggested for this letter is late 1224. It is possible that Saint Francis already had received the stigmata. This prayer is seen by some as a separate prayer from the letter; it sums up the letter beautifully.

<sup>2</sup> Here we have an economic theology of the Trinity, a theology of the way in which the Trinity works together for our salvation and transformation.

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In the very beginning of his spiritual journey Saint Francis, like everyone else was caught up in the secular world around him. He was from the merchant class and spoilt by his parents who support him in his quest for knighthood. He sought with a joy born of romance and chivalry the honours of this world. He was popular because he had money and as the “Lord of the Revels” he was the leader of the fun loving youth of the town of Assisi. They were in one way admired by the citizens of the town and in another way annoying by their nightly frivolity shouting, singing and dancing in the piazza and streets when more sober citizens wish to be in bed asleep. They were just youth having a good time.

But politically all is not at ease in the town and the wealthy middle class vied with the nobility for political dominance over the town. In the war with Perugia, probably November of 1202 at the Battle of Collestrada the victory went to Perugia and Francis at age 21, along with the knights and soldiers of Assisi was imprisoned in Perugia for at least a year. Eventually, like others Francis was ransomed by his family. He return home ill and depressed, robbed of the joy of life he once possessed. He barely survived. As he returned slowly to good health, he sought life again in the things he once lived for, but it was not the same as before. Again in the spring of 1205 he threw himself into the impossible dream of knighthood and kitted himself out with his father’s pride in new armour, this time to fight for the Papal in Southern Italy. At the very beginning of this journey he met a knight who was wearing very poor armour and in an impulse of generosity and true chivalry he gave away to him all his own bright polished armour. That night while sleeping he had a dream of a hall filled with armour and a voice told him that this armour was the armour of his knights that would join him in the future. The dream was repeated and the voice asked him a question: “Who do you serve the Master or the servant?” Francis replied, “The Master!” and the voice told him to return to Assisi and wait there. In fact Walter de Brienne leader of the Papal army was captured in southern Italy and died.

During the next period of his life, while he was waiting for clarity of purpose, he was in a state of expectant confusion. It was not just confusing for Francis, but for also for his family and all those who knew him. Virtually the whole town was in some sense watching him and wondering what was going on in the life of this once joyous young man. He now seemed to spend more time in churches praying for guidance. From this time comes a very personal and marvellous prayer.

**M**ost High  
glorious God,  
enlighten the darkness of my heart  
and give me, Lord,  
correct faith,  
a certain hope,  
a perfect charity,  
sense and knowledge  
so that I may carry out  
Your holy and true command.

Seeking an answer to what God wanted him to do Francis spent time praying in the churches of Assisi. The quieter they were the better. He had a particular fondness for the little church of San Stefano and spent a great deal of time there over the years. But it was the partly ruined chapel of San Damiano outside the walls of the town that become his favourite chapel, because of the

beautiful crucifix there. Francis was also driven out into the small caves up in the hills outside the town of Assisi. He went there often with an unidentified friend, who seemed content to wait for him outside in the woods and accepted his explanation that he was looking for a treasure. This need to have someone with him, a soul companion, is important in Francis' life and remains true even later on La Verna where he had Br Leo as his companion. Francis was a naturally fraternal person even if he did not recognise this at first and though God was calling him to be a hermit.

We are told that the first indication of what the Lord wanted him to do came when one day Francis came across a leper and despite his horror of lepers, he actually got off his horse and kissed this leper and then immediately got back on his horse and looked around only to find that there was no sign of the leper to be seen. His experience of going among lepers had such an effect in his life that later when he wrote his last Testament, of all the wonderful miracles that happened to him, this was the one that stood out for him, beyond all the rest. *"The Lord led me among the lepers and what seemed so nauseating to me became so sweet"* He discovered the humanity behind the horrible images of this disease and recognised the terrible loneliness of those people outcast by and from society.

It is Saint Bonaventure alone who tells us that after this experience of the illusive leper, Francis had a mystical vision of the Crucified Jesus that was so powerful that it affected his whole life from that time onwards. It was after this visitation of the Crucified that Christ spoke to him from the Cross of San Damiano. *"Francis, go repair my Church which you see is falling into ruins!"* Here the simplicity of Saint Francis showed through. He took the request literally and set to work rebuilding San Damiano. He was now so sure of what he was meant to do that he began to involve the whole town in this enterprise by going out and begging for stones for this church. It is here that his gift of prophesy manifested itself. He told everyone that this place would become a convent of nuns. But it is not until he begins building his second chapel that Saint Bonaventure tells us he find the way to follow Christ.

Francis was a thoroughly Catholic young man, and he instinctively realised that if he wished to understand Christ more fully and enter into a deeper and more intimate relationship with him, then he must turn to his Blessed Mother for assistance, because she is the first among all Christians. Saint Bonaventure tells us in Chapter 3 of his Life of Saint Francis, that while Francis was living at and restoring the *Portiuncula*, the little chapel of Our Lady of the Angels, he *"prayed to her, who had conceived the Word full of grace and truth, begging her insisently and with tears to become his advocate. Then he was granted the true spirit of the Gospel by the intercession of the Mother of Mercy and he brought it to fruition."*

Two things are immediately obvious. The first is that this little church became a symbol for him of the Virgin Mary and secondly Saint Bonaventure rightly calls her in this context the Mother of Mercy. The over-riding virtue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of both Saint Francis and Saint Clare is loving compassion. Francis' devotion to Mary is intricately linked to his understanding of the Catholic Church as the bride of Christ. Despite many attempts to do so, Saint Francis cannot be separated from the Catholic Church and her sacramental mission in the world to give birth to the Kingdom of God. Mary's role of intercessor is clearly seen by Saint Francis in this prayer to her:

Hail, O Lady,  
holy Queen,  
Mary, holy Mother of God:  
you are the Virgin made church  
and the one chosen by the most holy Father in heaven  
whom he consecrated  
with his most holy beloved Son

and the Holy Spirit the Paraclete,  
in whom there was and is  
all the fullness of grace and every good.

Hail, His Palace!  
Hail, his Tabernacle!  
Hail, His Home!  
Hail, His Robe!  
Hail, His Servant!  
Hail, His Mother!

And, hail all you holy virtues  
which through the grace and light of the Holy Spirit  
are poured into the hearts of the faithful,  
so that from their faithless state  
you may make them faithful to God.

In the last verse of this prayer we have a clear insight into how Saint Francis saw the process of transformation into Christ comes about. It is through Mary that the fullness of grace comes to us by the power of the Holy Spirit who clothes us in the virtues, which are the wedding garments of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is in and through Mary, the Mother of Mercy<sup>3</sup> that Saint Francis, who called himself *“the greatest sinner in the world,”* the one most in need of God’s mercy, experienced the compassion of God and found the key to transformation in Christ. It is nothing less than complete cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Saint Bonaventure tell us, that it was at Mass one day on the feast of one of the Apostles where our Lord sends out his disciples and tells how they are to live according to the Gospel that Saint Francis was inspired and cried out: *“This is what I want. This is what I long for with all my heart.”* It was by divine inspiration that he began to strive after Gospel perfection. It was the working of the Holy Spirit in his life that is the key to understanding Saint Francis’ spirituality.

The Holy Spirit is the teacher promised by Christ. The Holy Spirit is the finger of the Living God who never points to himself; he always points to Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the true pattern and exemplar for our life. The work of the Holy Spirit is nothing less than our transformation into Christ. To do this, the Holy Spirit revealed Christ Jesus to Saint Francis in three basic ways: First as the mystical Christ with whom he was invited to have an intimate personal relationship in prayer. Second, the Holy Spirit revealed Christ to Francis in the magisterium of the Church. Third, the Holy Spirit revealed Christ in the Word of Scripture and the Blessed Sacrament.

For Saint Francis, the mystical Christ revealed himself in visions, the medieval hall filled with armour,<sup>4</sup> in the leper who vanished,<sup>5</sup> and the vision of Christ crucified, which affected his whole life, and through the San Damiano Cross.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Following on from St Pope John Paul II’s initiative to have the Second Sunday of Easter as the Feast of Mercy, Pope Francis has inaugurated a Holy Year of Mercy. This is very much in accord with the mind of Saint Francis when he asked Pope Honorius III to grant a plenary indulgence for the feast of the Portiuncula on August 2<sup>nd</sup> each year. This indulgence is also called the “Pardon of Assisi”.

<sup>4</sup> LMj 1:3. It was after this vision of the Hall of Armour that St Francis was asked by Christ to choose between the Lord or his servant.

<sup>5</sup> LMj 1:5 Of all the mystical experiences in his life St Francis would recall this one in his Last Testament.

<sup>6</sup> LMj 2:1 St Bonaventure sets the scene of Francis’ encounter with the San Damiano Cross within the romantic context of Genesis 24:63 with the words, “Now Isaac went walking in the fields as evening fell...” . It is a context of Isaac the bridegroom and his bride Rebekah about to meet each other for the first time.

Odd as it may seem to some, Saint Francis found Christ in Bishop Guido of Assisi, Cardinal John of St Paul, Pope Innocent III, Pope Honorius III and Cardinal Hugolino, later Pope Gregory IX. Simple enough to say he found Christ in the reality of Church. Saint Francis, after he had died, even appeared to Bishop Guido to say goodbye.<sup>7</sup>

There can be no doubt about St Francis' love for the Gospel as the texts for the first Rule of 1209 were essentially from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.<sup>8</sup> His concern for the Sacred Scriptures is also shown in his Letter to the Entire Order No 35 and 36:

I, therefore, admonish all my brothers  
and encourage them in Christ  
to venerate, as best they can  
the divine written words  
where ever they find them.  
Let them gather them up and preserve them...  
Honouring in the words the Lord Who spoke them.

His awareness of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is clearly expressed in the 1<sup>st</sup> Admonition 12, where he says: *"It is the Spirit of the Lord, therefore, that lives in his faithful that receives the Body and Blood of the Lord."* However, nothing can compare with his astonishing insight and love of the Eucharist as expressed in his Letter to the Entire Order.

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  
Under an ordinary piece of bread!  
Brothers, 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!

Saint Francis understood that daily transformation of our lives comes about through having a constant "spirit of prayer and devotion"<sup>9</sup> to which all things must be subordinate. He places this statement in his approved Rule where he wished the brothers to understand that they should not

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<sup>7</sup> LMj 14:6 "At that time the bishop of Assisi had been at the shrine of Saint Michael on Monte Gargano because of a pilgrimage. Blessed Francis appeared to him on the night of his passing and said: "Behold, I am leaving the world and am going to heaven." Such was the courtesy and love St Francis had for Bishop Guido as his spiritual father.

<sup>8</sup> The Texts for the Rule of 1209 are variously given as: Mt. 19:21 (but it is not in the San Nicolo Missal for this day); Mark. 10:17 (is in the San Nicolo Missal); Mt.16:24 (is in the San Nicolo Missal); Mt. 10:9; Lk. 10:4; Lk 9:3. It is almost certain that St Francis would have come back to these texts again and again, so all are given.

<sup>9</sup> Rule of 1223 Ch.5:2 "they do not extinguish the Spirit of Holy prayer and devotion."

engage in any work in such a way that it distracts them from their first priority of prayer and devotion. We find this repeated in his letter to Saint Anthony.<sup>10</sup> Here Saint Francis warns against so much study that we are distracted by it. Saint Francis even sees the study of sacred theology as a distraction from a real relationship with the Lord who is found in prayer. He knew, as if by a spiritual instinct, that we can end up knowing all about Christ without knowing Christ.

In the end Saint Francis made a statement that indicated true obedience is having the freedom to cooperate fully with the Holy Spirit. He often said, "*The Minister General of the Order, the Holy Spirit, rest equally upon the poor and simple*" not only on the wise. This statement Celano tells us<sup>11</sup> was so important to Saint Francis that "*He wanted this thought inserted into his Rule, but since it was already approved by Papal Bull, this could not be done.*"

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This explanation of Franciscan Spirituality is not meant to be an all-encompassing treatise on the subject, but rather a guide towards a better understanding of its source and process. This process takes place in contemplation and fraternity. These are not separate, but interwoven like words on a ring they go around and around. In this fraternity is the core reality; it is both Trinitarian in contemplation and missionary in activity. With this goes the principle "*No action without reflection.*"

Ultimately Saint Francis' "Canticle of Brother Sun" sums up his universal and even cosmic vision of reality. For this and other prayers of Saint Francis please refer to the section on this web page titled: "The Inner prayer life of Saint Francis".

The approach to Christian perfection, followed by Saint Francis, is also called seraphic spirituality because of its emphasis on love of God. This was articulated by the great spiritual masters like Saint Anthony, in his preaching, Alexander of Hales, a Franciscan master at the University of Paris in his teaching and ultimately by Saint Bonaventure, who produced his masterpiece the "Journey of the Mind into God" while reflecting on the life of Saint Francis, at La Verna where Saint Francis received the stigmata. In his "Tree of Life" and other works Bonaventure strives to give the friars an understanding of how contemplation of Christ is the means of inner transformation of the soul. However, it is Blessed John Duns Scotus who provides Franciscan spirituality with its theological cornerstone in his doctrine of the absolute primacy of Christ. Scotus points out that in God's eternal will to create, He primarily intends the individual human nature that is to be assumed by the Word. Thus the Incarnation, unconditioned by anything done by creatures (even original sin), is the pure and primary act of God's creative love. Jesus is truly "the first born of every creature" (Col 1:15), the King of all creation for whose sake all other creatures exist. Man, who is prince of creation because made in the image of Christ, exists to glorify the Incarnate Son by being with Him the co-lover and co-worshiper of God.<sup>12</sup> The essential characteristics of Franciscan Spirituality are that it is Christocentric, Ecclesial, Mystical, Ascetical and incarnational.<sup>13</sup>

John Cooper OFM Cap

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<sup>10</sup> EpAnt: 2 "It pleases me that you teach sacred theology to the brothers, as long as –in the words of the Rule – you 'do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion'; with study of this kind."

<sup>11</sup> 2 Celano 193 St Francis asks to be given a small tonsure of the Lay Brothers. This text does not seem to appear anywhere else in the sources, which seems odd if it was so important. The Rule of the Friars was finally approved on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1223, so this statement about the Holy Spirit being Minister General comes in the last years of Saint Francis' life.

<sup>12</sup> Dun Scotus, Opera Omnia, Vivès (Paris 1891) 23:203b; Reportatio Parisiensis 3.7,4).

<sup>13</sup> For further reading see: New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 1967, "Franciscan Spirituality" pp.36, 37,38.