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Knowing Francis Through His Prayers

We can learn a great deal about Francis' prayer life through his writings especially his own prayers that have come down to us. We can only touch on this topic as it would be too long to explain all of Francis' prayers. Perhaps if we examine some them we will get the idea and perhaps do some research ourselves. Let us begin with one of Francis' favourite prayers:

The Praises of God

- ¹ You are holy Lord God Who does wonderful things.
- ² You are strong. You are great. You are the most high.
You are the almighty king. You holy Father,
King of heaven and earth.
- ³ You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;
You are the good, all good, the highest good,
Lord God living and true.
- ⁴ You are love, charity; You are wisdom, You are humility.
You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness,
You are security, You are rest,
You are gladness and joy, You are our hope,
You are justice,
You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.
- ⁵ You are beauty, You are meekness,
You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,
You are strength, You are refreshment. ⁶ You are our hope,
You are our faith, You are our charity,
You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life:
Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Saviour.

This prayer was found on the reverse side of the parchment given to Brother Leo. Note how it ends with a contrast between omnipotence and mercy. "God all powerful and merciful Saviour" which is like the Canticle of the Creatures which begins, "Most High Omnipotent..." and ends with "humility" ("serve Him with great humility.") There is a contrast between the greatness of God and the goodness of God that runs throughout the prayer.

We see this a number of times in Francis' life where he seems to degrade himself, or perhaps it would be more correct to say, seeing himself in the light of God's love and mercy and making a comparison of God's generosity in comparison to his own. Recall the familiar prayer of Francis, "My God, My God, who are you and who am I?" which expresses the greatness of God and at the same time the baseness of man. Cf. The *Fioretti IX* where Francis tells Leo to respond in one way but Leo gives the opposite:

"Once at the beginning of the Order Saint Francis was with Brother Leo in a place where they did not have books for saying the Divine Office. When the time for Matins came, St Francis said to Brother Leo: 'Dearest Brother, we do not have a breviary with which we can say Matins, but so that we may spend the time in praising God, I'll speak and you'll respond as I teach you. And be careful that you don't change the words into something different from what I teach you. I'll say this: O Brother Francis, you have done so many evil things and so many sins in the world that you are worthy of hell.' And you, Brother Leo,

will respond: 'That's true: you deserve the lowest place in hell.' And Br Leo with dove-like simplicity responded: 'Of course, Father, begin in the name of God.' Then St Francis began to say: 'O Brother Francis, you have done so many evil things and so many sins in the world that you are worthy of hell.' And Br Leo responded, 'God will do so many good things for you that you will go to Paradise.' St Francis said, 'Don't say that, Brother Leo! When I say, "Brother Francis you have done so many evil things against God that you deserve to be cursed by God, you will respond like this: Truly you deserve to be put among the cursed.' And Brother Leo responded, 'Of course, Father.'

The story goes on to tell how Leo cannot find any wrongs in Francis but continues to promise him God's blessings. Francis becomes annoyed with Br Leo until he realizes it is not for him to decide God's loving plan for him.

What does Francis' prayers reveal about Francis' prayer life? The *Praises of God* tell us more about Francis' image of God in the adjectives he uses to describe God as he knows God. When we speak about God, we always do so in symbols and approximations even though these language devices are inadequate and inappropriate. So it follows that we can never speak about him in a fitting way. However, as believers, we need to speak about God in order to express our faith so that it will not die. "If we do not try to describe God, His presence will fade from our minds and disappear completely." The same was the case for Francis. Being a simple layman, he borrowed the language of the liturgy to express the inexpressible. Thus, by examining the language he used in his prayers, we will come to understand something of the concept he had of God and understand more about his prayer life.

We note firstly that the deep feeling he had of God's presence urged him to tell of his greatness. When he came to put these feelings into words, he was unable to do so adequately. The tradition of the East and the West describes God by saying what He is not, and Francis followed that tradition when he spoke about God. Therefore, when we speak about God we use words such as "ineffable, incomprehensible, unknowable, immutable or invisible" – all words that point to the mystery of God.

We say that God is "transcendent" and "immanent". When we speak about the God that Francis knew, we cannot separate these two ideas because Francis never used these terms. Certainly, Francis realized God is inaccessible to our eyes and beyond our reach. But he also knew God draws near to us and invites us to go to Him. When Francis speaks of God, he shows that he has moved away from the influences of the early Middle Ages where God was seen as a fearful Avenging Judge in great majesty, a terrifying God of the Book of Revelation. God's humanity in all its greatness and yet in his suffering became the more popular image.

In Francis' writings, the word "majesty" never appears. Francis speaks of the Most High God, Supreme, Eternal, Almighty and Glorious God. This was how Francis saw God. "This transcendence was a divine dimension which showed that God does not exist in things or events and is not to be confused with them, but transcends them as their support and reason for being. With words 'High' and 'Most High,' Francis expressed his experience of God, who is beyond all things." It was Francis' familiarity with liturgy, the Scriptures and especially the psalms and the Father that provided him with the words to express his experience.

Look how Francis speaks of God in the following prayer:

Let the whole of mankind tremble	O humble sublimity!
the whole world shake	That the Lord of the Universe,
and the heavens exult	God and the Son of God,
When Christ, the Son of the living God,	so humbles himself
is present on the altar	that for our salvation
in the hands of a priest.	He hides himself under the little form of bread!
O admirable heights and sublime lowliness!	
O sublime humility!	

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