



SECTION TWO
Different Views of God

Introduction to

FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY



SECTION TWO: Different Views of God

People speak about 'turning to God' or 'following the Way of Christ' to indicate that they have been learning to change themselves in a form of relationship to God. They feel that they can see their life's journey as happening within a larger reality that is all of life. All of life is God's story, and their path is one route within that. They might try to identify details they have discovered about relating to God, who at one time promises to make them appreciate healing, at another time to receive training as soldiers of faith, able to battle with wrongs. God therefore touches people at different levels at different times. Thus he can seem like an agricultural overseer of a plot of land, wanting to ensure the soil remains fertile. When we read *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, we notice that, as Bernard and others began their preaching, they saw themselves as learning patience: "because they were of the true vine, that is Christ, they produced great and good fruit: the souls they won for God" (LFI 5). This was written a century after the early years of the Franciscan communities, so a lot of metaphors from the Bible have been brought into the presentation of this metaphor of fruitful faith. The chapters of this book are meant to tell readers a lot about the first followers of Francis, but people are mentioned who did not get a mention in Thomas of Celano's account. For instance, a long chapter tells us many details about the inner mental states of a friar called John of Fermo: "he would get up and run as if drunk: sometimes through the garden, sometimes through the woods... as the flame and force of the spirit drove him" (LFI 49). At one point Jesus himself suddenly "appeared near him on the path" and at this John threw himself at Jesus' feet, telling his Saviour about his pain and fears, adding, "without you I am deprived of all good and blinded" and describing Jesus as a "fountain of every gift": You are... the bread that restores and the wine that gladdens the choirs of Angels and the hearts of all the Saints." Jesus, he says, is a "kind Shepherd," so he prays, "give me the joy of your face and your merciful glance." He follows Jesus further until Christ turns and looks at him "with a happy and kind expression" and embraces him."

We should not assume that the author of this chapter actually checked the details with John of Fermo, quizzing him to be sure that what he was writing was accurate. Some of the details are piety deriving from regular community prayers, based on the psalms that were used. The picture is produced from a religious imagination, keen to encourage readers to think about what it might mean to become followers of Christ. We have mentioned how Francis did think about God's will on a series of occasions. His religious imagination kept presenting him with motives that shaped a gospel mentality: a church

to rebuild, time with a leper, the folly of mad partying. All of these can be considered as God's call, though his inner conviction that a mysterious, new life was possible. The ongoing presence of divine help teaches people to be true to the love placed within them by God.

Even if our views of God change, God himself does not change. It is out style of attending to God's help, and putting it into words when others show an interest that is likely to change. Meeting the interest of others requires a version of story-telling about conversion that respects several hidden realities making their mark, revealing a divine favour perhaps, one after another, or interconnecting. There were people close enough to the young St. Francis for him to have entrusted them with his remembered moments of grace. But they could also portray his attentiveness and the biography of collaboration amongst the companions from their own perspectives. If they attributed some initiatives to the Spirit of God, it might be their own notion of how the Spirit acts, not the actual process of learning to be open to God which actually took place. If we are tracking the early stages of Franciscan spirituality appearing, we must allow for the narrators' own opinions. We must wonder how carefully any narrator listened to what Francis told them. Francis did write poetry and hymns, letters and other reflections of his faith. Some of those writings, such as the two versions of a Rule, guidance to live by, were partly dictated, partly re-worked and re-written, to respect various complications which others had noticed.

Thomas of Celano, who joined the friars in about 1215, nine years after the first group of companions had begun a life of prayer and public preaching, was the first to write a full Life of St. Francis. He finished this in 1229, three years after the founder's death. We can read Celano's beautiful brand of story-telling in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, vol. I. This Life of St. Francis was written at the request of Cardinal Hugolino, who had been appointed as a protector of the new communities, as they were observed multiplying in numbers so fast. Celano realised that he must demonstrate how powerful God had been, in turning around the motivations of a young nobody, whose ambitions had included winning fame as a soldier, and who had quarrelled publicly with his prosperous father. The result was recognisably tailored with quoting from Augustine's Confessions at one point and from the Life of St. Martin of Tours, by Sulpicius Severus, at another, to indicate how God's guidance was as vividly real for Francis as it had been in late antiquity. Celano wanted readers to accept Franciscans as effective examples of what many church members were hoping to meet: a reform of corrupt, cynical and uncharitable practices within Christian institutions. Given this was his aim, though, has Celano provided a

reliable picture of how Francis would describe his faith in God? Where can we look, to discover that true voice of Francis himself, if this Life is mostly a matter of friars talking about themselves and their continuing plans?

The question of a reliable picture can be investigated further. Was Francis guiding a set of religious communities because of an experience he once had, when a painted Christ figure spoke to him, an experience which no one else shared? Or did he do it because he had been able to experience some loving phrases about commitment from Scripture, which others could and did share? Or, thirdly, was it that he wanted to be a model leader of the sort which powerful prelates of a powerful Church had repeatedly praised? Or fourthly, was the action of the Spirit of God too complex, touching each of his companions, to be summed up in any of these patterns? We do have to examine the third suggestion carefully, because he soon became involved with top officials such as Hugolino. If we take the 'model leader' idea at its face value, we might be brushing aside many important passages in the sources, which tell us about Francis, Bernard, Sylvester and the others being deeply moved, through experiences of an energising call and God's continuing presence. We can quote two examples. Bernard of Quintavalle received Francis initially as his guest, watched him secretly as he prayed in his room, and then felt "refreshed by the fragrance of his holiness" (1C IX). Sylvester, a priest, dreamed that he saw a great cross "rooted" in Francis' mouth (3C X). He then "saw" devils "fanning flames of mutual destruction" (2C VII) as he looked towards the city of Arezzo from the outside. He also "saw" these destructive forces defeated and peace restored.

Surely these do seem to be rather individual faith experiences. Story-tellers such as Celano gathered them with the intention of offering them as aspects of a larger narrative: God's plans for many better communal realities, not just the success of Franciscan houses. For this reason such unusual experiences are treated as given by God, in order to nudge the specific person touched towards greater connections with other believers. The experiences prompt them to interact more fully and sincerely as Christians. Celano is not merely lining up a series of model Christians, to voice some slogans and promote a hierarchically-approved reform movement. Each anecdote tells us something about conversion as a learning curve, through hints about the sorts of learning that happened to Bernard and Sylvester. The gift of an image which carries a potential for teaching is also evident in a different key event from early on (about 1205). This featured in Francis' quest to see his own true intentions and destiny. After a startling vision of some magnificent armour, which could

become his if he would serve as a leader and a soldier, he reached Spoleto. There he struggled through a very disturbed, fitful night, learning through an inner drama not to pursue the kind of chivalry implied in the dream-vision. A voice was once again speaking to him. It asked him "Who can do you more good, the lord or the servant?" (3C II). The voice continued to speak, nudging him to decide in favour of serving God, the Lord of all, and not to tie himself to the feudal service typically demanded by any local warring landowner.

Here, then, is one more story about discovering the call of God. Changes have to happen within the heart and mind of Francis. His heart should no longer treasure visible splendour, even in imaginary versions. He should let the Spirit direct his desires instead, until they seek to announce the kingdom of God. Discernment of what makes a wrong 'vision of service' was an essential part of the lesson he learned. In the thirteenth century social context, accepting this as a valid and valuable lesson was very significant. Almost every possible area of social activity was liable to include demands about being subservient to this or that structure or man of status. State demands and Church demands would both carry a designation of readiness to 'serve.' Someone who distinguished between serving Christ, by means of a life of faith, and the career path of serving dominant social powers, could often, easily fail to be accorded a respectful hearing.

Evidently Francis was aware of Jesus' teaching, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:34). Those who retold this particular dream could, however, find it easy to distort. It might be reduced to a neat choice between a life of marketing and militant control on the one hand and a path to clerical status on the other. In other words, it could be reduced to a choice between sacred (Church-based duties) and profane (manufacturing and money-making). While some in the medieval world certainly did cling to that contrast, the faith of Francis aimed to see beyond those earlier pictures of life which spoke of 'the world' as bad and places of prayer as good. This is not the whole of what Jesus' saying means. Francis did love to find places where he could be open only to God, but he also announced that the whole world was his cloister. God for him is "unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable" but also "blessed, worthy of praise,... gentle, lovable, delectable and totally desirable." All is mystery, then. Yet when among all sort of neighbouring humanity, the friars will say "Peace to this house," aware that God will help them, even if their treatment there is evil: "if someone should take away their clothes, they should not deny him also their tunic. They should give to all who ask, and if anyone takes what is theirs, they

should not demand that it be returned" (RNB 14).

Is this the full picture, though? The terminology about God here is rather scholastic, probably because it was in an official document, intended to gain approval from a hierarchical audience. In a more personal document, written by Francis for his companion Leo, none of the language about God is so abstract: "Lord, God, living and true.... You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness, You are inner peace, you are joy... You are all our riches,... You are strength, you are refreshment.... You are our eternal life" (PrGod). It may be that the more tender view of God set up in Francis equally a more tender view of those who came to him for advice and fraternity. There are also scriptural points of reference relevant to all these attributes. Conversation with friends who had clerical training, such as Leo, did not have to end in abstractions. Francis' companions were sometimes not theologically trained, but could still have a calling in which they mostly tried to help people to distinguish between good and bad orientations in their lives, "virtue and vice." This was described as preaching, but could happen in the market-place, with little catechetical following through on the details of the gospel stories. The view of God might then be limited to a distinction between a God of correction and a God of consolations. For Francis, even this slight amount of faith and love would tug society away from some of its obsessions, and create a sensitive, loving range of relationships.

We can ask, then, whether a variety of spiritual experiences recorded about Francis' whole process of becoming more open to God are expressions of the God who is mystery, and thus perhaps remote, or expressions of the God whose purpose and manner of showing his concern is virtually tangible and seems close to people. Going on our own experience, we might say that both realities are genuine, and that transitions back and forth between the two styles of God-consciousness are likely to have taken place. This does not mean that we can always pin down which awareness of God was to the fore in any one recorded incident. The same sense of transitions taking hold is likely to apply to stories of unusual spiritual awareness that were told about several of Francis' companions. The reality of God's will was not containable within any imaginative account of his motivating power. But it was made more of a feasible path to pursue, through the language and imagery of religious creativity. We can also ask how many itinerant preaching friars were aware of the contemplative implications of their message. Preaching about the love of God for the weak, or his promise of peace, in a general sense, was permitted to lay people. Sometimes this was taken up by groups such as the Humiliati,

for instance. These travelling groups received approval from Pope Gregory to preach in France, for instance, yet that was opposed by the French king and hid aristocrats. There was a degree of riskiness about calling yourself, as Francis did, 'the herald of the Great King'. We have an affectionate view of troubadours and jongleurs, who made this concept of the herald so lively, but they could also be strictly banned, legally excluded from various cities.

It was a matter for serious discussion amongst the friars, as they became more organised and numerous, whether their view of themselves as 'Lesser Brothers,' as true followers of Jesus, that is, would be widely accepted or might they be often mocked and driven away. St. Francis said it would be a good sign, when he and others were insulted and beaten, showing that Jesus' love needed brave voices, to keep an awareness of it to the front of people's minds. Society was too preoccupied with wealth, prestige, vain pleasures and shallow, competitive experiences to be open to God.

Francis, the son of the cloth merchant Pietro Bernadone, was born in Assisi, in Umbria, in 1181. By 1206 he had formulated an outline of the community life which he saw as so desirable to support himself and his fellow lay preachers. In 1209 a version of this (the now lost *propositum*) was presented to the Pope. A much fuller Rule had been composed by 1221 (the *RNB*, *Regula Non Bullata*), and a neater, shorter version of this was approved in 1223, just three years before Francis' death. From the last two sources we can also get glimpses of how the communities' shared perceptions of the will of God underwent modifications. Phrases from these documents are often selected to pinpoint what we could mean when we speak about 'Franciscan spirituality.' The two texts were developed through discussions which Francis had with other community members, including well-educated priests such as Caesar of Speyer and Leo of Viterbo. The language in them was not merely religious emotion. The Scripture quotes are carefully chosen, joined together by familiar theological statements, sections from the Creed that sum up Jesus' uniqueness, and moments of liturgical poetry.

We might wonder how well the friars agreed that this specific combination of themes and images would be the best blend to use. It had to express the ways in which Francis, as founder, had experienced the call to be a close co-worker with Jesus Christ in spreading the Gospel of Peace. The combination accepted allowed quite a lot of travelling and public interactions, in ways largely frowned on by the previous Benedictine behavioural guidelines. However, cities had grown very noticeably larger. The energies of traders and market organisers made

people's lives very mobile too. It was not always obvious how the dynamism of this group of itinerant preachers was bringing in a distinctive quality because of the shared prayer life they had in their friaries. Setting out a way of talking about God that made for creative tension, a challenge to the commercial clamour on the streets, was an important objective for those early Franciscans.

Images of St. Francis used to illustrate prayer books, such as the one on the cover, from a later medieval Book of Hours, contain hints of the dynamic and itinerant response to God. This image shows him as a herald of the Gospel, a public voice proclaiming the public will of God, calling for widespread conversion. The image does not tell the viewer what details Francis preferred when talking to God or about God. It doesn't say a lot about his actual life. But it does indicate him a one who travelled regularly, who had official endorsement and a role in society, and who had the ability to make responsible use of Scripture or other written religious sources. It may be helpful therefore to set this image alongside an account of what the Christian doctrine of "God-made-man" might have meant to St. Francis. Here is a view of this from Eloi Leclerc, who makes a contrast between Francis and a rich Flemish cloth merchant, Jehan Boinebroke, known for suppressing workers "with cruel energy":

"As he knelt before the image of the Crucified...he was possessed by a new spirit. The more he came to sympathize with the distress of his fellow men, he made another discovery that profoundly moved him. What he began to perceive under the figure of the Crucified was God's humanity, or, better still, God in human form. Hour after hour Francis gazed upon Christ hanging on the cross. No; that God did not at all resemble the lordly prelates of the Church; he was not the God of feudal wars, not even of the crusades. Nor was he the God of the privileged classes in the new social order, the God of the rich merchants. He was a God totally alien to power and wealth. He was not a God come to dominate and terrorize; on the contrary, he had reached the lowest ebb of this world's distress. He had plunged into this sea of sorrow; he had taken it upon himself, and it dripped from his whole body."



Further Reading

E. Leclerc, *Francis of Assisi: Return to the Gospel*, R. Arnandez tr., (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983) pp. 27-40.