

# *Conference of National Spiritual Assistants*

## Secular Franciscan Order

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF MAY 2023.

### YOU ARE UNIQUELY LOVED BY GOD

**Heacceitas** – From the latin *haec* (literally *this*); the individuating principle of each being; the ultimate reality of being. (Mary Beth Ingham, *Scotus for Dunces*)

Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* states that Franciscan spirituality's intense focus on the person of Jesus Christ lead to a major turning point in Western Civilisation, the primacy of the individual, that marks our modern western culture. He describes the change as more than an intellectual shift but a revolution in our devotion, prayer and love towards one individual, Jesus Christ. This shift changed our collective understanding of humanity and the world.

The person most responsible for expressing this shift in outlook was Blessed John Duns Scotus. Scotus in his writing pondered on what makes one object different from another. Are we just the sum of our parts? He recognised that we share many properties with other people, we are all human! We are all made up of the same substance. But is it just different combinations of matter that determines who we are?

Unknown to Scotus we share much of our genetic being, our DNA, with other being things. A chimpanzee might share 86% of its genetic material with us. Surprisingly a cat has nearly the same genetic codes that we do; a cow 80% and a banana about 60%! While DNA might be a factor in many of our individual traits, we are more than our DNA? We are more than our *quidditas* (the *what* are we?).

Scotus suggests that each of us and every “thing” has a certain aspect that makes them unique. He called this *heacceitas*, *thisness*. A person's *thisness* is a characteristic unique and impossible to repeat aspect of that person. We are more than just the sum of our parts.

Scotus had a view that a person's *thisness* was intrinsically unknowable except by God. Not being a material property, we cannot sense our own *heacceitas*. Not only can others not understand who we truly are, we cannot truly know ourselves. We are a unique mystery even too ourselves. It is this *thisness*, in ourselves and creation, that points beyond the material world towards the divine.

The only person who can see completely know our *thisness*, our true identity, is God. The Bible describes how God knows the “number of hairs on our head” (Luke 12:7) and that even before we were formed God knew our identity: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer 1:5). Not only living things but all elements of creation have a unique *thisness*. God gives a unique existence to sparrows and every blade of grass. Duns Scotus proposes that *thisness*, the quality of individualisation, is the ultimate reality of being. All things are uniquely loved into being by God.

The implication is that all of creation, and especially each person, is a unique expression of the love of God. It calls us to go beyond labels when looking at the reality before us. We share a common nature (*natura communis*) our humanity and we may share traits from our forebears, but we are individually gifted by God (with our *haeccittas*). Our true identity is not defined by gender, our social standing or wealth, our nationality, our race or culture. We are not interchangeable “human resources”, nor can we be generalised in some statistical study. Behind the common description of “the poor” are individuals loved personally by God. Every person has a unique God given dignity worthy of our personal attention and respect.

The Rule and Constitutions of the Order of Franciscans Secular calls for the “accepting of all people as a gift of God” (Rule 13) and “respect for all creatures.... Which bear the imprint of the Most High” (Rule 18). The Rule and Constitution reminds members of the Order that they are not just called “collectively” to work

towards conversion and act for peace and justice, but each are called to respond “individually.” (Rule 15, Art 13, Art 23, Art 33)

Franciscan fraternities are not a collection of like-minded people, they are a community of individuals with unique God given gifts and talents. It is much our different gifts and personalities as Franciscans, as much as our common calling, that we need to celebrate together.

Franciscans are each called to conform to the image of Christ in each of us, not in someone else. St Francis’ dying words to his brothers highlight this: “*I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!*” (Bonaventure, Life of Blessed Francis)

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Blessed John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) has long been recognised as a holy man by the Franciscan movement, who referred to him as *Doctor Subtilis* (the subtle doctor). His theological and philosophical ideas have been in dialogue with St Thomas Aquinas’ work throughout the centuries in the life of the Church. Scotist thought has informed many Catholic doctrines, most notably in the teaching of the Immaculate Conception of Mary: a special statement about her *thisness*, her unique role in God’s plan for salvation.

Blessed John Duns Scotus was only formally honoured by the universal Church in 1993 when he was beatified by Pope John Paul II. Just as there has been a resurgence in Thomistic thinking by some in the Church maybe it is time for Franciscans to renew their understanding and appreciation of the Scotist elements of their spiritual, theological and philosophical heritage.

#### Further Reading

Cross, Richard. *Duns Scotus*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 1999.

Ingham, Mary Beth. *Scotus for Dunces. An introduction to the Subtle Doctor*. Franciscan Institute. Saint Bonaventure, NY. 2003

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass. 2007..

Ward, Thomas M., *Ordered by Love. An introduction to John Duns Scotus*. Angelico Press. Brooklyn, NY. 2022.

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PLEASE, DISTRIBUTE THIS MESSAGE TO YOUR FRATERNITY,  
INCLUDING ISOLATED MEMBERS