

## A WORD FROM JOHN DUNS SCOTUS

To the question, then, I say that some things can be said to belong to the law of nature in two ways:

[1] One way is as first practical principles known from their terms or as conclusions necessarily entailed by them. These are said to belong to the natural law in the strictest sense, and there can be no dispensation in their regard ...

[2] The other way in which things belong to the law of nature is because they are exceedingly in harmony with that law, even though they do not follow necessarily from those first practical principles ...

To put all we have said together, first we deny that all the commandments of the second table pertain strictly to the law of nature. Second, we admit that the first two commandments belong strictly to the law of nature; third, there is some doubt about the third commandment of the first table; fourth, we concede that all the commandments fall under the law of nature, speaking broadly....

*Ordinatio III, distinction 37*

The Cord  
The Franciscan Institute  
St. Bonaventure, New York 14778

Periodical Postage Paid  
at St. Bonaventure, NY 14778  
and Additional Office

Attention Postal Service:

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THE CORD

JANUARY/MARCH 2008

# THE CORD

VOLUME 58, NO. 1 • JANUARY/MARCH 2008



• A FRANCISCAN SPIRITUAL REVIEW •

*THE CORD*  
*A Franciscan Spiritual Review*

Publisher: Michael Cusato, O.F.M.

Editor: Daria R. Mitchell, O.S.F.

Distribution Manager: Noel Riggs

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*The Cord* (ISSN 0010-8685 USPS 563-640) is published quarterly by the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778. (716.375.2160)

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: \$28.00 a year; \$7.00 plus shipping per copy. Periodical postage paid at St. Bonaventure, NY 14778 and at additional mailing office.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Cord*, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778 USA.

NOTICE TO CONTRIBUTORS: Address all manuscripts to Editor, *The Cord*, The Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778.  
(Email: dmitchel@sbu.edu)

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1. MSS should be submitted on disk in Microsoft Word.
2. The University of Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed., is to be consulted on general questions of style.
3. Titles of books and periodicals should be italicized or, in typed manuscripts, underlined. Titles of articles should be enclosed in quotation marks and not underlined or italicized.
4. References should be footnoted except Scripture sources or basic Franciscan sources. Scripture and Franciscan source references should be identified within parentheses immediately after the cited text, with period following the closed parenthesis. For example:

(1Cor. 13:6).      (2C 5:8).      (ER 23:2).      (4LAg 2:13).

A list of standard abbreviations used in *The Cord* can be found inside the back cover. Franciscan sources used should be noted in the first reference in a mss. and should be taken from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*.

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Cover design: Mark Sullivan

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## FOREWORD

To all our readers, blessings and greetings in this New Year of Our Lord! Thanks to all of you who have taken the time and effort to complete the survey in the last issue and returned it to us. As the deadline is not yet upon us, no collated results are available. However, all input, suggestions and comments will be discussed and used in our planning for future issues.

This issue is somewhat of a potpourri. We have several first-time Cord contributions: Frances Biscoglio explores "The Canticle of Brother Sun," Joanna Waller takes us through Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, Lance Richey shares his insights on the similarity between Henry David Thoreau and St. Francis of Assisi, and Matthew Farrington reflects on his trip to the SOA. But there are some familiar contributors: Seamus Mulholland investigates the mystery of the Incarnation, Robert Karris introduces us to Hildegard of Bingen as a medieval preacher, and Clare Julian Carbone writes about Franciscan/Islamic relationships. We round out this issue with two book reviews, and the usual announcements and the Franciscan Circuit.

Here at St. Bonaventure, the atmosphere is quickening in anticipation of the Festival of the 25th Anniversary of the Third Order Regular Rule on April 18-19, 2008. If you have not done so, there is still time to register and make arrangements to share this historic celebration.

While January has been a mixed bag with respect to the weather, still we have before us several more weeks of "winter." With activities restricted to those of the indoor variety, it's a good time to catch up on that reading you've been putting off. If you have not tried our new online Shopping Cart, take some time to browse and take note of the special introductory prices on selected items. You can find it at <http://franciscanmart.sbu.edu> In any event: Happy Reading!

Daria R. Mitchell, OSA

## "CANTICO DI FRATE SOLE": SIGNATURE OF THE SAINT

FRANCES BISCOGLIO

More than 780 years after his death, Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) continues to be a man for all seasons. The events of his remarkable life, first recorded by his contemporary Thomas of Celano in 1229 and passed down through the centuries, still inspire writers and readers today. Since the new millennium alone, three new full-length biographies<sup>1</sup> have appeared. His life story shows Francis to be a man of contrasts. There is Francis the naturalist, the ecologist, the joyous evangelist singing praises to God or preaching the Gospel as he walked the hill towns of Umbria. But there is also Francis the recluse who spent weeks in a cave in mystical prayer, the stigmatic who suffered almost constant physical pain and near blindness, the ascetic who lived in radical poverty and total humility. Of his own writings, the most authentic expression of his vision of life – his signature – can be found in the only poem he wrote in the Italian vernacular, considered to be the "first poem of the Italian literary canon": "Il Cantico di Frate Sole" (The Canticle of Brother Sun).<sup>2</sup>

The canticle is Francis's hymn of praise to God in celebration of the created universe. In it, he sees the cosmos filled

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Company, 2004); Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi* (New Jersey: Hidden Spring, 2000); Donald Spoto, *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Viking Compass, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The more traditional title of the canticle is "Il Cantico delle Creature"; however, modern criticism suggests that the title "Il Cantico di Frate Sole" is the one used by Francis. See Alessandro Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love: Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the thirteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 79, 104, n.3.



with harmony, order and light, restored to unity and wholeness through the salvation brought by Christ in his Incarnation. In this renewed cosmos, human beings are bonded to all creation, to each other, and to God. This essay will analyze the background of the poem, its structure and content, and the features in language and style that make it unique. It will also link the canticle to the Christological world view of St. Bonaventure (1217-1274) found especially in his *Itinerarium* and *Hexaemeron*.

### BACKGROUND OF COMPOSITION

The authenticity of the canticle can be verified by references to it in early Franciscan documents, including Thomas of Celano's *Vita Prima* and the *Assisi Compilation*.<sup>3</sup> The canticle, a poem of fourteen uneven stanzas, is a praise to God for and through his created universe. It was written at three different times during the last two years of his life, 1225-1226. Stanzas one through nine were composed during his stay at St. Clare's convent of San Damiano in Assisi, where because of failing health he had been forced to stop on his way to Rieti to have his eyes cauterized, probably in the winter or spring of 1225. Struggling in a state of spiritual desolation, Francis experienced an assurance from God that he was saved and that he would "live in peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom" (AC, 83). Filled with joy, he composed the canticle in his own Umbrian dialect as lyrics for a melody, a song now lost. He directed his companions to go out and praise God by singing it to the people. Stanzas ten and eleven were added later "as a conciliatory sermon

<sup>3</sup> Thomas of Celano's *Vita Prima* and the *Assisi Compilation* can be found in Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., J.A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M.Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M., eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, three volumes (New York: New City Press, 1999-2001). The reference to the canticle in Thomas of Celano is in FA:ED Vol. 1, 1C, XXIX; the reference in the *Assisi Compilation* is in FA:ED Vol. 2, AC, 7 and 83. Further references to the early writings by and about Francis of Assisi are taken from FA:ED and are noted in the text by name and chapter only.

to his own warring townsfolk"<sup>4</sup> in Assisi. Stanzas twelve and thirteen, focusing on death and life eternal, were composed shortly before he died in October of 1226 at the Portiuncula in Assisi. The final stanza was probably composed earlier with the first nine stanzas and was meant to be a refrain sung after each verse.<sup>5</sup>

### THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF "IL CANTICO DI FRATE SOLE"

The fourteen stanzas vary in length from two to three verses. The movement of the poem is circular. It begins with an address to God the omnipotent Father (stanzas one-two), flows downward in the created universe from the heavens to the earth (stanzas three-nine), then focuses on human beings in their reconciliation, death, and union with God (ten-thirteen). The last stanza returns to the theme of the first, urging universal praise, thanks, and service to God Almighty.

In the first two stanzas, God is called *Altissimo* twice, a term repeated two more times in stanzas four and eleven. These initial stanzas establish the power and majesty of God. They stress the absolute praise owed to him and the vast distance between Creator and creature, between Almighty God and insignificant man, the *nullo uomo* who is not even worthy to mention his name.

Stanzas three through nine form the central portion of the canticle and mark a shift from the narrator praising God alone toward praising God with all his creatures (*cun tutte le tue creature*). Reflecting the Genesis creation narrative, Francis symbolizes this universe of creatures in a descending order from sky to earth, as a series of three heavenly bodies (sun, moon, and stars) and four earthly elements (wind,

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Jay M. Hammond, "St. Francis' Doxological Mysticism in Light of His Prayers," *Francis of Assisi: History, Hagiography, and Hermeneutics in the Early Documents*, ed. Jay M. Hammond. (New York: New City Press, 2004), 138.

water, fire, earth). The structure of each stanza in this section does not vary. First comes the refrain of praise in which each cosmic element is named and addressed with a familial title of courtesy. The refrain is followed in the second part of the stanza by a series of qualities that characterize each element. The anaphora *Laudato sie, mi Signore* (Be praised, my Lord) is not original with Francis; it is the traditional form of praise found in medieval liturgical prayer. Scholars cite two main Biblical sources for this format of praise for the creation: Psalm 148 and Daniel 3:52-90, called the Song of the Three Young Men. Roger Sorrell has included a detailed comparison of these three hymns of praise in his book, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*.<sup>6</sup>

The precise meaning of the word "per" which follows each expression of praise in this section – eight times – has been the source of much critical controversy throughout the centuries.<sup>7</sup> Did Francis mean "per" as "for" in the sense of causality? – that is, we praise God in thanksgiving for all the beauty of his creatures. Did he mean "per" as "through" in the sense of instrumentality? – that is, we praise God by means of his creation. Or did he mean "per" as "by" in the sense of agency? – that is, creatures themselves praise God by the very fact of their existence.<sup>8</sup> It seems reasonable to conclude, as does Lawrence Cunningham that all these multi layered meanings are present in the word "per," for which there can be no single translation.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of the sun both cosmologically and theologically is signaled by its primary place in the litany of praise and the length of the description. It is allotted two stanzas totaling five lines, making it the longest description of the elements with the exception of death. The sun gives light, and therefore life, to all creation. As such, it symbolizes God him-

<sup>6</sup> Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, Ch. 6, 115-24. Sorrell presents a thorough analysis of the differing interpretations of the word, citing early writings to support these interpretations.

<sup>8</sup> Hammond, "Doxological Mysticism," 142-43.

<sup>9</sup> Cunningham, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 53.

self. Also, the sun is a metaphor for Christ, the Son of God and the light of the world.<sup>10</sup> This Christological presence in the universe is also suggested in the unusual double title of the heavenly body as both *messer* (mister) and *frate* (brother). *Messer* is a title of respect that shows deference to the sun because of its dominance in the solar system. But *frate* immediately puts the narrator on an equal par with the sun and with other elements in the universe, including human beings. Symbolically, we can easily infer that the *messer* alludes to God as Father and the *frate* to God the Son, who became "a brother to humanity" through the Incarnation.

Following the sun, the other six elements in the heavens and on the earth are similarly addressed as brother and sister. But the last element mentioned, the earth, is given a double epithet like the sun and is referred to as both *sora* (sister) and *nostra madre* (our mother). Thus sun and earth, male and female, paternal and maternal, giver and receiver, maker and sustainer of life, form the framework of the cosmos. In this way, Francis reinforces the familial relationship among all members of the created order made possible in and through the humanity of Christ. In other words, Francis "enfraternizes all creation in God"<sup>11</sup> because it has been transformed by the presence of Christ in the world. The fraternity among all levels of creatures also points to equality between the sexes. Because of the gendered nature of Italian nouns, the six elements mentioned in stanzas three through nine alternate between three masculine and three feminine words: *Messer lo frate Sole*, *sora Luna e le Stelle*, *frate Vento*, *sor Aqua*, *frate Foco*, and *sora nostra madre Terra*. One is reminded again of the words from Genesis, which make no distinction between masculine and feminine: "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen1:27). Both the addressing of inanimate creatures as "brother and sister" and the implication of gender equality in creation are unique features in the canticle and are not found in any other hymns of praise to God for his creation.

<sup>10</sup> See Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 127; Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 127.



Another rhetorical device in the canticle is Francis's use of the sustained image. In the words of Hopkins, he sees the cosmos as "charged with the grandeur of God."<sup>12</sup> He expresses this vision in the use of verbs, nouns, and adjectives that suffuse the poem with a sense of light, peace, and harmony. Vettori notes that the "common trait of this poem is the brightness of renovation and rejuvenation, which illuminates the description of every element or creature."<sup>13</sup> The aura of light is most apparent in the original Umbrian dialect and is used here. The verb *allumini* (to light up) in stanza three, referring to the sun, is echoed in stanza eight with the same verb *enn'alumini* describing the fire lighting up the night. The sun is *radiante* with *grande splendore*, (Latin *splendere*, to be brilliant). The moon and stars have been formed with *clarite*. Unlike the Genesis description of creation, where light and dark differentiate day and night, Francis emphasizes the power of light: the moon and stars and fire illuminate the night, therefore redressing its darkness.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the divine presence brings peace, indicated in the description of the wind/weather as *sereno* and the water as *casta*. It also brings order and harmony to the created elements, which Francis equates with beauty. The most frequently used adjective in stanzas three through nine is *bello* (stanzas four, five, and eight, referring to sun, moon, stars, and fire), followed by the more intense synonym, *preziose* in stanza five (referring to the moon and stars) and *preziosa* in stanza seven (referring to the water).

Besides providing an aura of brightness and serenity throughout the canticle, the profusion of descriptors following each refrain of praise from stanzas three through nine is noteworthy for another reason. The almost breathless succession of three or four adjectives, separated by the repeti-

<sup>12</sup> "The world is charged with the grandeur of God  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed."

Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin, 1953), "God's Grandeur," 27, ll. 1-4.

<sup>13</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 82.

tion of the conjunction *e*, communicates literally a sense of the rapture, ecstasy, and joy that Francis experienced when he wrote the canticle. The extended modifiers seem to take on a life of their own. They do not appear in either of the related biblical sources, Psalm 148 or the Song of the Three Young Men (Daniel 3:52-90) and mark the rhetorical originality of the canticle. As examples of Francis's innovative style, stanzas seven and eight, the praises to *sor Aqua* and *frate Foco*, are quoted below in Italian and English.

Laudato si, mi Signore,  
per sor Aqua,  
la quale e molto utile  
e umile e preziosa e casta.  
(7)

Praised be You, my  
Lord, through Sister Wa-  
ter,  
who is very useful and  
humble and precious and  
chaste.

Laudato si, mi Signore,  
per frate Foco,  
per lo quale enn'allumini  
la nocte:  
ed ello e bello e jocundo  
e robustoso e forte. (8)

Praised be You, my  
Lord, through Brother  
Fire,  
through whom you  
light the night,  
and he is beautiful and  
playful and robust and  
strong.

The effective use of consonant and vowel sounds also heightens the beauty of the verses. Although the end words of the stanzas do not ordinarily rhyme, there is often internal rhyme (*utile e umile*), as well as assonance (*ed ello e bello e jocundo e robustoso e forte*). Note also the repetition of the liquid "l" (*molto utile e umile; lo quale enn'allumini la nocte*) and "r" sounds (*robustoso et forte*). In sum, lines ten through twenty-two represent the central focus of the poem, with its theme, content, and language forming a joyful celebration of "the natural world in light of Christian redemption."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love*, 79.

With the beginning of the third section, stanzas ten through fourteen, the lyrical praises disappear, the emphasis shifts from created nature to humankind, and the tone becomes somber. As noted in the *Assisi Compilation* (7), ten and eleven, written to appease a political argument between the mayor and bishop of Assisi, stress the forgiveness of others. The next two stanzas on Sister Death (twelve and thirteen) warn of the need to avoid sin, repent, and do God's will. The final line calls for service and humility before God. The concept of harmony, reflected previously in the fraternal bond among all levels of the created world, becomes dominant in this section, where human beings are now reconciled to each other and finally to God. Sorrell notes, in fact, that the last part of the canticle "transforms the poem into an example of unification and reconciliation."<sup>16</sup> Also linking parts two and three is the repetition of words related to the verb *sostenere*, meaning to sustain, support, uphold, nourish, and also endure. In stanzas six and nine respectively, which include the noun *sustentamento* and the adjective *sostenta*, it is God who sustains and nourishes the wind and the earth. In stanzas ten and eleven, however, the verb forms *sostengo* and *sosteranno* refer to humans who sustain or endure their trials in peace. By using the same root word to refer to both divine and human activities, Francis implies that human suffering and endurance, when accepted in God's name, are divine activities. One difference in the final section is that human beings are addressed generically and not with individual names as in the case of the heavenly and earthly bodies. The *Beati quelli* (Blessed are those) of stanzas eleven and thirteen echoes the Beatitudes, but the *nullo omo* in twelve, repeated from stanza two, has a negative tone. Moreover, the scriptural *Guai a quelli* (Woe to those) in thirteen sends a warning to human beings. Salvation can come only with reconciliation to others and to God's will through humility. One should not fear mortal death, only the death of sin that separates people from each other and from God. Addressing death as an equal and intimate part of the family of God's creation (*sora nostra*

<sup>16</sup> Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 135.

*Morte*) reintroduces the theme of connection between all levels of the created order.

The fourteenth stanza closes the circle of creation where it began, with the same offering of praise, blessing, and thanks to God that begins the canticle. However, the point of view in the last stanza is different from those used in the other praises throughout the poem. For example, in stanza one, the narrator addresses God actively and directly with praise and thanks. (*Altissimo, onnipotente, bon Signore, tue so le laude, la Gloria e l'honore e onne benedizione*). In following stanzas God is also praised many times for his creation, but in passive form. (*Laudato si, mi Signore*). In the fourteenth stanza, however, the narrator calls upon the faithful and invites *them* to give praise and thanks to God. (*Laudate e benedicite e rengratiate e servite lo*). This change to the imperative plural is significant because it engages human beings as active participants in the circular journey just described, hastening the return to God who is their origin.

#### FRANCIS AND BONAVENTURE: CHRIST THE CENTER OF THE CIRCLE

Reflecting on the canticle in its entirety, one can appreciate the way its three interlocking sections unite to form an organic whole. The unapproachable God of the first two stanzas then draws close to the universe in the second section, becoming present on earth through the mediation of his Son, symbolized by the sun. Christ is thus the center of all created reality as the sun is the center of the solar system, and his presence sacramentalizes the world. In the third section, human beings reconciled to each other and their Creator rejoin him in thanks and praise. This movement from God to creation and back again to God anticipates the Christological world view in the writings of St. Bonaventure.

As the first General Minister of the Franciscan Order (1217-1274) and one of Francis's earliest biographers, Bonaventure also sees Christ as central to the meaning of creation and human existence. The link between the theme of

the canticle and the "entire structure of his [Bonaventure's] metaphysical vision"<sup>17</sup> can be seen particularly in two of his works, the *Itinerarium Mentis Ad Deum* (*The Journey of the Soul into God*, 1259) and the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, (*Collations on the Six Days*, 1273) written at the midpoint and end of his life respectively. In the sixth chapter of the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure writes: "Christ the Son of God is ... the circumference and the center, the alpha and the omega..., the creator and the creature"

(*Itin.* VI:7).<sup>18</sup> The same idea is found in the first of the six col-

lations in the *Hexaemeron*.<sup>19</sup> In his commentary on this text, Zachary Hayes writes that for Bonaventure, God the Father is "the ultimate source and goal of all created reality"; God the Son is "incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, thus assuming a central place in the created universe..."; and the world as God's creation is "caught up in a history of emanation and return (*egressus* and *reditus*), in the center of which stands the person of Jesus Christ." One is reminded of T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world."<sup>20</sup>



<sup>17</sup> Zachary Hayes, *The Hidden Center: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2000), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, WSB II (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002), 131.

<sup>19</sup> Hayes gives the reference in Bonaventure as Hex. 1:7 in volume 5, 343 of the critical 10 volume Quaracchi edition of his works: (*St. Bonaventure Opera Omnia* 1881-1902).

<sup>20</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 117.

Francis's vision of creation in the *Cantico di Frate Sole* reached far beyond the life of Bonaventure. In affirming the value of the material world as God's handiwork transformed by his Son, Francis was also affirming the value of human beings in that world. This positive attitude had a profound effect on Italian art and literature of the early Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance. It initiated "a new realism in the depiction of the human figure and the surroundings in which figures lived and moved."<sup>21</sup> It was a realism that appealed to the popular culture, one found in the work of both Giotto and Dante, who also wrote in the vernacular. At its core, the Franciscan signature of the canticle written across the centuries is rooted in Genesis, when God, having given shape and form to creation, "saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:51). In this sense, the canticle is traditional. But in viewing all levels of the created order bonded in a familial relationship to their creator and to each other, in expressing this bond by calling the elements his Sisters and Brothers, and in celebrating this it with the rapturous intensity of its poetry, Francis's *Cantico di Frate Sole* is unique.

#### IL CANTICO DI FRATE SOLE

#### THE CANTICLE OF BROTHER SUN

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1 Altissimo, onnipotente,<br>bon Signore,<br>tu so le laude, la Gloria e<br>l'onore e onne bened-<br>izione. | 1 Most High, all-powerful,<br>good Lord,<br>Yours are the praises, the<br>glory, and the honor,<br>and all blessing, |
| 2 A te solo, Altissimo, se<br>confano<br>e nullo omo e digno te men-<br>tovare.                              | 2 To You alone, Most High,<br>do they belong,<br>and no human is worthy to<br>mention Your name.                     |

<sup>21</sup> Vincent Moleta, *From St. Francis to Giotto: The Influence of St. Francis on Early Italian Art and Literature* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 23.



- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 3 Laudato sie, mi Signore,<br>cun tutte le tue crea-<br>ture,<br>spezialmente messer lo<br>frate Sole,<br>lo qual e iorno, e allumini<br>noi per lui. | 3 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>with all Your creatures,<br>especially Sir Brother Sun,<br>Who is the day and through<br>whom You give us light.   |
| 4 Ed ello e bello e radiante<br>cun grande splendore:<br>de te, Altissimo, porta sig-<br>nificazione.   | 4 And he is beautiful and<br>radiant with great splen-<br>dor;<br>and bears a likeness of You,<br>Most High One.   |
| 5 Laudato si, mi Signo-<br>re, per sora Luna e le<br>Stelle:<br>in cielo l'hai formate clarite<br>e preziose e belle.                                 | 5 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>through Sister Moon<br>and the stars,<br>in heaven You formed them<br>clear and precious and<br>beautiful.   |
| 6 Laudato si, mi Signore,<br>per frate Vento,<br>e per Aere e Nubilo e Sereno<br>e onne tempo<br>per lo quale a le tue creature<br>dai sustentamento. | 6 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>through Brother Wind,<br>and through the air, cloudy<br>and serene, and every<br>kind of weather,<br>through whom You give<br>sustenance to Your<br>creatures. |
| 7 Laudato si, mi Signore,<br>per sor Aqua,<br>la quale e molto utile e umile<br>e preziosa e casta.   | 7 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>through Sister Water,<br>who is very useful and<br>humble and precious<br>and chaste.  |
| 8 Laudato si, mi Signore,<br>per frate Foco,<br>per lo quale enn'allumini la<br>nocte:<br>ed ello e bello e iocundo e<br>robustoso e forte.           | 8 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>through Brother Fire,<br>through whom you light the<br>night,<br>and he is beautiful and<br>playful and robust and<br>strong.                                  |

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| 9 Laudato si, mi Signore,<br>per sora nostra matre<br>Terra,<br>la quale ne sostenta e gov-<br>erna,<br>e produce diversi fructi con<br>coloriti flori ed erba.                | 9 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>through our Sister<br>Mother Earth,<br>who sustains and governs<br>us,<br>and who produces various<br>fruit with colored flow-<br>ers and herbs. |
| 10 Laudato si, mi Signore,<br>per quelli che perdona-<br>no per lo tuo amore<br>e sostengo infirmitate e<br>tribulazione.  | 10 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>through those who give<br>pardon for Your love<br>and bear infirmity and trib-<br>ulation.  |
| 11 Beati quelli che l' soster-<br>rano in pace,<br>ca da te, Altissimo, sirano<br>incoronati.  | 11 Blessed are those who<br>endure in peace<br>for by You, Most High, shall<br>they be crowned.  |
| 12 Laudato si, mi Signore,<br>per sora nostra Morte<br>corporale,<br>da la quale nullo omo vi-<br>vente po' scampare.  | 12 Praised be You, my Lord,<br>through our Sister Bodi-<br>ly Death,<br>from whom no one living<br>can escape.   |
| 13 Guai a quelli che mor-<br>rano ne le peccata mor-<br>tali!<br>beati quelli che trovara ne<br>le tue sanctissime vol-<br>untati,<br>ca la morte seconda no li<br>farra male. | 13 Woe to those who die in<br>mortal sin.<br>Blessed are those whom<br>death will find in Your<br>most holy will,<br>for the second death shall<br>do them no harm.            |
| 14 Laudate e benedicite mi<br>Signore,<br>e reingraziate e servitelo cun<br>grande umilitate   | 14 Praise and bless my Lord<br>and give Him thanks<br>and serve Him with great<br>humility.  |

Ed. Vittore Branca, 1950,  
82-87

Eds. R. Armstrong, O.F.M.,  
et. al., 1999, FA:ED  
Vol.1., 113-14

## DUNS SCOTUS AND THE INCARNATION IN FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY

SEAMUS MULHOLLAND, O.F.M.

John Duns Scotus (c.1266-1308) is one of the most important thinkers in the history of Christian thought, and an aspect of that thought is crucially relevant to our world today. More known as a philosopher of great insight and perception, his primary contribution to theology is little known outside the Franciscan order, yet is one of the most dynamically creative moments in the development of Franciscan theology and spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

Though a profound theological and philosophical thinker, Scotus was first and foremost a Franciscan.<sup>2</sup> His doctrine of the Incarnation (more fully known as the Doctrine of the Primacy of Christ in the Universe) is firmly rooted in the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual tradition, at whose core is the Person of the Incarnate Son as this is experienced in the radical evangelical witness of Francis of Assisi. At the centre of the life of Francis is the Incarnate Crucified Lord of all creation, whom Francis called our "Elder Brother"; at the centre of the life of Scotus is the Incarnate Person of the Son, whom he calls "God's Masterpiece" [*summum opus Dei*].<sup>3</sup> In Scotus,

<sup>1</sup> A good introduction to the history of Franciscan theology is K. Osborne et al., *A History of Franciscan Theology*, (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1994; reprinted 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Tradition says Scotus was taken to Oxford by two friars "when he was still a boy." It may be that Scotus entered the Order as young as 15 years old. See A. Wolter, O.F.M., *Duns Scotus: Philosophical Writings*, (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1987), xiii-xxvii. A fuller biography of Scotus is found in A. Wolter, "Reflections on the Life and Works of Scotus," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXVII, Winter 1993, No. 1, 1-37.

<sup>3</sup> Literally translated it means "greatest work of God" but "God's Masterpiece," a phrase used by the late Eric Doyle, O.F.M., perhaps more

the Incarnation is not a contingency plan when the original creative process of God goes awry because of sin. Scotus rejects this notion as too central an emphasis on humanity to the extent that the freedom of God to act in love is determined by an external necessity, i.e. the redemption from sin. Scotus understands the Incarnation as always being in the mind of God even before the historical and existential physicality of creation itself and the fact of sin.<sup>4</sup>

The Incarnation is the model for creation: there is a creation only because of the Incarnation. In this schema, the universe is for Christ and not Christ for the universe. Scotus finds it inconceivable that the "greatest good in the universe," i.e. the Incarnation, can be determined by some lesser good, i.e. humanity's redemption. This is because such a sin-centred view of the Incarnation suggests that the primary role of Christ is as an assuager of the universe's guilt. In the Primacy, Christ is the beginning, middle and end of creation. He stands at the centre of the universe as the reason for its existence. In this sense the universe has realized its creational potential more than Humanity, since it is created with the potential to bear the God-Humanity and the Incarnation has taken place historically and existentially. Further, in the Incarnation creation is glorified [a notion which is also present in Bonaventure],<sup>5</sup> but humanity, as yet, has failed to

eloquently catches the nuance. See E. Doyle, "Duns Scotus and the Place of Christ," *My Heart's Quest: Collected Writings of Eric Doyle, Friar Minor, Theologian*, ed. Joseph Raischl and André Cirino, (Canterbury, England: Franciscan International Study Centre, 2005), 290.

<sup>4</sup> Christ would have come even if Adam had not fallen and the Incarnation, as the highest good is willed prior to sin, and even though sin has been foreseen by God, the Incarnation is not God's response to sin and the necessity for humanity to be redeemed. It is rather a free act of God's loving to predestine the creature Christ to grace and glory before the fall of humanity, and thus, all created natures to grace and glory in Christ since it is Christ who is the template for all other existents outside God. God foresees the fall, and predestines Christ as Redeemer. But this is secondary [*a posteriori*] to his predestination to glory. It is interesting to note that Albert the Great, the teacher of St. Thomas, also argued for an Incarnation even if there had been no sin in *In Sent. III d.20 q.5*.

<sup>5</sup> For Bonaventure, sin is the reason for the Incarnation, and Jesus is truly the redeemer, but Bonaventure did not limit his understanding of the Incarnation or redemption to this alone. God could have chosen to restore

reach its potential to "love one another as I have loved you" [Jn.13:34].<sup>6</sup>

Scotus argues that the reason for the Incarnation is Love: the Love that is the Divine Essence in and of itself and the free desire that God has to share that love with another outside the Godhead who can love God as perfectly as God loves himself, i.e. the Christ. Scotus says that all the souls that were ever created and about to be created could not, cannot and never will measure up to the supreme love that Christ has for the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> The very fact that the Incarnation is understood to have been conceived in the intention of God prior to sin has consequences for us also. In Scotus's thought one of the consequences is that as Christ is first in intention to be predestined to grace and glory, he thus stands as the 'template,' 'blueprint' for all else that exists and thus all else that is predestined to that same grace and glory. Grace and glory, which, as Scotus understands and uses it, is union with God. In this way, therefore, Christ is the 'first born' of all creation. Since 'first' is a relative term, there must be others: all existing things are the 'others.' It is in this context that

creation in some way other than the Incarnation. Bonaventure conceives the Incarnation as the most noble work of God [for Scotus it would be the *summum opus dei*- God's masterpiece] See also I. Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, (New York: New City Press, 2001), 90; see also Sermo II, "On the Nativity of Christ," *What Manner of Man*, ed. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), 57-75.

<sup>6</sup> The idea that creation is wrought with a built-in potential for fulfillment comes from Robert Grosseteste, the first teacher of the friars when they went to Oxford. Grosseteste suggests that the potential is for creation to "bear the God-Man." Since the Incarnation has already happened in time and in fact, then creation has fulfilled its potential. For a fuller discussion, see D. Unger, O.F.M. Cap., "Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln 1235-1253 and Reasons for the Incarnation," *Franciscan Studies*, 16, (1956), 1-36. The idea of humanity still working its way to the fulfillment of its potential is found in Teilhard de Chardin's notion of "hominisation." See, T. de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1959, reprint 1965), 199. This concept also has some interesting significance for Franciscan approaches to environmental theology and philosophy. See S. Mulholland O.F.M., *Franciscan Philosophy and Environmental Ethics*, (Canterbury, England: Franciscan International Study Centre, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Scotus works out his Incarnational theology in *Ordinatio III d.7 q.3* and in the *Reportata Parisiensis III, d.7 q.4*.

we, as created after the 'model' which is Christ, are co-heirs to this Trinitarian love that Christ has. The Incarnation, then in Duns Scotus, becomes the unrepeatable, unique, and single defining act of God's love outside the Godhead. God, says Scotus, is what God is: we know that God exists and we know what that existence is: Love.<sup>8</sup> Thus, if humanity had not sinned Christ would still have come, since this was pre-visionsed and predetermined from all eternity in the mind of God as the supreme manifestation of love for the creation brought about by God's free act.

As the Trinity is happy in its own self, it does not need the Incarnation to either show itself to be totally happy, or to show others outside itself that it is totally happy.<sup>9</sup> This being the case, all acts outside the Trinity are free acts and they are contingent acts. Since the Trinity acts for no other reason than its own self, the Incarnation is a free act which is rooted in the Trinity which is Love itself. The "communio-in-love" that is the Trinity needs nothing other than its own self-love [which is the Divine Essence] to be totally happy. The Incarnation is the effect of God freely choosing in Love to move out beyond that self-subsistent, self-fulfilling beatitude that is the Trinitarian Love which is always the sole reason why God acts. The Incarnation, therefore, in Franciscan spirituality

<sup>8</sup> Scotus arrives at this conclusion from his interpretation of Ex.3:14 and the revelation of the Divine Tetragrammaton YHWH which is usually translated as I Am. While the Hebrews did not regard this as making a profound statement about the Divine Ontology, Scotus (given his position on univocity of Being and *ens infinitum*) does. Thus, God's existence is "Being" as being. So we know *that* God is, and by utilizing the First Letter of John, we can know *what* that being is: *God is Love*. Metaphysically Scotus would not say God "is" Love (at the ontological level) only that God "is" (as Being-qua-being) but theologically and spiritually, he certainly would. See for example his opening prayer in the *De primo principio*, 1.1 in A.B. Wolter, *A Treatise on God as First Principle*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Scotus writes, "In this love of his Divine Essence God is perfectly happy; God first wills the end and in this act he is perfect and his intellect is perfect and his will is happy." This is the essence of Scotus's Trinitarian theology which he works out in great detail in Ord III. See also R. Cross, "Duns Scotus on Divine Substance and the Trinity," *Journal of Medieval Theology and Philosophy* 11, (2003), 181-201.



is rooted in the Trinitarian Love and not the need to redeem humanity from sin; it is rooted in freedom, not necessity.

Sin has been given too much prominence in contemporary soteriology: God redeems from sin because he loves us? No, says the Scotist, God loves us and then redeems us. Redemption is an act of love first and foremost, not an act of saving us from sin, and the first act of redemption is the Incarnation. God foresees us in union with him before sin is seen as the cosmic fragmentation of that relational dynamic between God and us. Scotus makes it clear that the first movement is from God; a revelatory movement wherein God freely chooses to move beyond his own self-loving and share that loving with something other than the God-Self, namely creation, and this process is epitomized in the Incarnation.

What the Scotus vision of the Incarnation shows us is not primarily the need for redemption, but the need that is in each one of us for love. That love which is so utterly free and unmerited that it embraces our own limitations, our own failures, our own hopes and longings and in uniting itself to us in the Incarnate Word in the person of Jesus of Nazareth elevates the human project to that which it always was in the mind of God. Scotus begins with Love, that love which is the very being of God; he travels the road of Love, which is made humanity in the Incarnation, and he ends with love, that love so hard to see in the misery of the abandoned Jesus on the cross, but which paradoxically is the totality of creation's love for the Godhead since the cross becomes the *sine proprio* point of love's no return; that Love which renews and glorifies the whole creational project in the Resurrection.

Franciscan Spirituality sees the Incarnation as the guarantee of union with God. It is not something to be hoped for or to be looked forward to – it is something, which is happening now. God is Love and that Love is our redemption and redemption is not primarily being saved from sin, but is rather the gift of the possibility of openness to the experience of the Divine Other in our life. Redemption is a consequence of Incarnation, not the other way around and Redemption is Love's refusal to let what is loved be lost. How can it be otherwise when we posit the notion of the divine and humanity

in Jesus? Scotus's doctrine of the absolute centrality of Love is both timely and profoundly needed by our world. Men and women cry out for an experience of hope in a world which has lost direction. In the teaching of Duns Scotus on the Incarnation, Franciscan Spirituality has within its hand that hope-filled experience and the end of that longing. For if God willed the Incarnation from all eternity, then it was always God's intention to become part of creation – sin determines the mode of that becoming, but it does not determine the fact that it was going to be.

The Incarnational thought of Duns Scotus needs a broader hearing, for it is pertinent to all Christians and the world, not just the Catholic tradition. The Incarnation is of God, not humanity. Scotus is indeed in the tradition of Francis and his Incarnational theology is not complex – it is utterly simple: God is love and all that has been, is and ever will be is because God is love and is among us in Jesus who is ever present.



## HILDEGARD OF BINGEN'S EXPOSITION 12.1 ON THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON<sup>1</sup>

ROBERT J. KARRIS, O.F.M.

### INTRODUCTION

The two sermons of Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) on the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)<sup>2</sup> provide a splendid example of medieval preaching by a woman.<sup>3</sup> These are monastic sermons, delivered by Abbess Hildegard to her sisters. Whereas we are accustomed to preachers who address the meaning of the Scripture text that has already been proclaimed, the medieval practice espoused by Hildegard of Bingen is to quote a portion of the text and then to im-

<sup>1</sup> I have translated the text edited by Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Carolyn Muessig. See Beverly Mayne Kienzle, "Hildegard of Bingen's Gospel Homilies and Her Exegesis of The Parable of the Prodigal Son" in Rainer Berndt (ed.), *Im Angesicht Gottes suche der Mensch sich selbst* Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179). *Erudiri Sapientia* 2 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), 299-324, esp. 319-21. I have added paragraph numbers for ease of reference. See also Jean-Baptiste Pitra (ed.), *Analecta Opera Sanctae Hildegardis*. *Analecta Sacra* 8 (Monte Cassino, 1882), 277-79. (Franborough: Gregg Press, reprinted in 1966).

<sup>2</sup> In another article I will treat Hildegard of Bingen's second exposition and will use St. Bonaventure's commentary on Luke 15:11-32 to show to what extent her interpretation is traditional. Space limitations prevent me from repeating that exercise for Hildegard's first exposition.

<sup>3</sup> See Carolyn Muessig, "Prophecy and Song: Teaching and Preaching by Medieval Women," in Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (ed.), *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 146-58, esp. p. 147: "Hildegard, unlike the most respected male scholars of her age, was not traditionally educated; she explained and understood her ability to preach as a gift of prophecy."

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mediately give a brief commentary thereon. In this way she went through the entire biblical text. In this regard Hildegard of Bingen's sermons are very similar to some medieval commentaries. I think especially of various Glosses, e.g., the *Glossa Interlinearis* on Luke 15:13: "**There he squandered all his property**: voluptuousness consumes all the goods of nature."<sup>4</sup> Beverly Mayne Kienzle has suggested that these two sermons of Hildegard of Bingen should be seen as dramatic narratives, in which the preacher would dramatically lead her listeners along the way of the narrative.<sup>5</sup> For example, the younger son is in thralldom in the villa of evil while the elder son dwells in the mansion of the virtues. Righteousness and Charity embrace the repentant younger son who had been mired so deeply in sin that he got bored with it all. The elder son asks one of the servants, Faith, why there is such merriment and jubilation.<sup>6</sup>

Kienzle's idea of dramatic narrative helps us to appreciate Hildegard's sermons on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but there is more involved in Hildegard's exegesis. For many theologians this parable was a key text in the assessment of the relationship of works to faith, of merit to justification. In this sermon Hildegard joins these theologians and demonstrates that she is beholden to the tradition that saw in the Parable of the Prodigal Son how works relate to grace and faith and how Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit function in the process of redemption.<sup>7</sup> For example, in paragraph 8

<sup>4</sup> See *St. Bonaventure's Commentary on the Gospel of Luke. Chapters 9-16*. With an Introduction, Translation and Notes by Robert J. Karris. *Works of St. Bonaventure VIII/2* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2003), 1427 n. 79.

<sup>5</sup> See "Gospel Homilies," 308.

<sup>6</sup> For a similar dramatization see Bernard of Clairvaux, "Parable 1: The Story of the King's Son" in *the Parables & The Sentences*. Cistercian Fathers Series 55 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 18-26, esp. p. 25 which quotes Luke 15:22-24, 32: "Queen Charity gathered up God's young son and carried him to Heaven and gave him back to God his Father. The Father came to meet him, full of mildness and gentleness. 'Quickly', he said, 'bring out the best garment and put it on him....'"

<sup>7</sup> By interpreting the fattened calf to be killed as the Son of God, Hildegard follows tradition in showing the role of Jesus Christ in salvation. She goes further by introducing the saving significance of the Holy Spirit.



the younger son does not mention the hired men, who are meriting, to his father, but "only waits upon God's grace." In paragraph 9 the repentant son receives the best robe of "the justice of innocence" and a ring for his finger which is "the possession of good works." In paragraph 13 Hildegard refers to what God the Father has done for the prodigal son in this way: "you anointed him with the passion of your Son in the abundance of life." Twice (paragraphs 9 and 14) Hildegard employs one of her favorite words, *viriditas* (greening; renewing power), to refer to the work of the Holy Spirit. Paragraph 9 says: "And let us make merry' in congratulation, because the greening of the Holy Spirit has bloomed again in him."

Interpreters over the years have had problems dealing with Luke 15:25-32, the role of the elder brother. Hildegard does not use a traditional interpretive model that the younger son represents the Gentiles and the elder son represents the Jews. Rather for her the elder son seems to stand for the contemplative sister who may be jealous or merely questioning the treatment God or the Abbess has meted out to a wayward individual or sister. Notice that in paragraphs 10-14 the action or dialogue is not outside, but inside the soul through thoughts, meditation, inspiration, and admonition. Hildegard has contextualized her sermon for her audience.

In summary, try reading Hildegard's sermon out loud to catch its flavor, as you imagine yourself interpreting this renowned parable – verse by verse – for a congregation during Lent, for this parable was the medieval Gospel text for the Saturday of the second week of Lent.<sup>8</sup>

1. **A certain man**, in whose image and likeness human beings were created.<sup>9</sup> **Had two sons**, for he gave human beings the knowledge of good and of evil.<sup>10</sup> **And the younger said**, who was more prone to evil because his moral charac-

<sup>8</sup> In the translation that follows the biblical text is set off in bold type.

<sup>9</sup> See Gen 1:25: "Let us make human beings in our image and likeness."

<sup>10</sup> See Gen 2:9: "... and the tree of the knowledge of good and of evil" and 2:17: "but you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and of evil."

ter was still being formed.<sup>11</sup> **And the younger of them said to his father**, to God. **Father, give me the share of the property**, that is, without me having to perfect an appetite for works. **Which falls to me**, for it seizes me with an appetite for pleasure. **And he divided his means between them**, since God joined himself to the one who has good knowledge and gave him glory and honor, but he permits the one, who desires to be in evil knowledge, to depart.

2. **And not many days later**, for the day of salvation is not present where there is evil. **The younger son gathered up all his possessions and took his journey into a country faraway**, that is, he withdrew from himself, so that he might fulfill all his wishes. **And there he squandered his fortune**, namely, he flung away his works in diverse sins, **by living voluptuously**, since he fulfilled his every wish in a shameful manner.

3. **And after he had spent all**, that is, after he had done many evil things so that he was even bored with them, **a grievous famine struck that country**, so that he himself who had not been concerned about getting something to eat as he did what he willed with evil, **also began to suffer want**, that is, he lost hope in a life that overflowed with sins.

4. **And he went**, departing from God, **and joined one of the citizens of that country**, since he had attached himself to evil, which had taken up residence for itself in his mind. **And he sent him to his farm**, namely, to the cultivation of sins, where evil itself resided, **to feed swine**, so that he might provide nourishment for iniquity through sins.

5. **And he longed to fill his belly**, namely, his desire **with the pods that the swine were eating**, namely, with the changed circumstances, for which he wanted to blame God, namely, because God would be more to blame for his sins than he himself would be. **And no one offered him**,

<sup>11</sup> The Latin is *in instabilitate morum*.



since no creature would back him up in his accusation that God was to blame.

6. **But when he came to himself**, namely, finally remembering his creator and the evils that he had done, for he had no hope in them, **he said**, thinking: **How many hired men in my father's house**, namely, who are meriting heavenly things by their blood and many labors, **have bread in abundance**, namely, in the abundance of justice. **While I am perishing here in hunger**, since I lack the appetite for good works. **I will get up**, from the evil way, **and I will go** through the good way **to my father**, who created me, **and I will say to him** with sighs and groanings: **Father, I have sinned against heaven**, namely, against the heavenly breath that is in the soul,<sup>12</sup> **and before you**, because I acknowledge you as God, although I have sinned. **I am no longer worthy to be called your son**, on account of the iniquity of my heart. **Make me like one of your hired men**, namely, those who through their own blood and many labors have fulfilled your will.

7. **And he arose** from his sins; **he went to his father**, along the good ways. **But while he was yet a long way off**, through his evil habits, **his father saw him** as he searched for him, **and was moved to compassion**, since he had touched him with the love shown in his return. **And he ran**, that is, out of compassion, **fell**, by bending down, **upon his neck**, that is, in the conception of justice, **and kissed him** in the joining of love.

8. **And the son said to him** in repentance: **Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you**, since I did not cease sinning although I knew who you were. **I am no longer worthy**, for I am a transgressor, **to be called your son**, so that you might receive me back into my former inheritance. But he said nothing about the hired men, but only waited upon God's grace.

<sup>12</sup> See Gen 2:7.

9. **But the father said** through heavenly inspiration **to his servants**, namely, to the virtues, through which human beings serve God: **Quickly bring the best robe**, namely, innocence, **and cloth him** with the justice of innocence, **and give him a ring for his finger**, namely, the possession of good works, **and sandals**, by which he may renounce the devil **for his feet**, so that he may walk rightly. **And bring out** by invocation **the fattened calf**, namely, the Son of God, who brought heavenly abundance, **and kill it**, repeating his martyrdom in it, **and let us eat**, tasting good works, **and let us make merry** in congratulation, because the greening of the Holy Spirit has bloomed again in him. **Because this my son**, whom I created, **was dead**, since he did not have the knowledge of God, **and has come to life again**, returning to me. **He was lost** because he lacked the memory of justice and did not have the abundance of life, **and has been found** along the way of justice. **And they began to make merry** in congratulatory celebration for the lost sheep that had been found.<sup>13</sup>

10. **Now his elder son was in the field**, namely, the one who has good knowledge in the cultivation of his heavenly inheritance. **And as he came**, by considering his ways, **and drew near** through good union **to the house**, that is, the mansion of the virtues, **he heard music** ascending to the heavenly realm, namely, the joy of heavenly vision, **and dancing**, namely, the beauty and glory by which one serves God. **And he called** through meditation **one of the servants**, namely, faith alone, **and inquired** by searching **what this meant** about the grace of God, which might sustain him.

11. **And he**, namely, faith, **said to him**, responding to his thought: **Your brother** in the Knowledge by which he knows God, **has come** because he has come along the righteous way, **and your father has killed the fattened calf**, that is, he through whom you were created has renewed the passion of his Son who brought the abundance of life, **because**

<sup>13</sup> See Luke 15:3-7.

he has got him back safe with a good reputation and has embraced him.

12. **But he was indignant**, namely, he was astonished that God had wrought such a great good out of so great an evil, **and would not go** into the welcome for his brother, for he did not have the necessary repentance, so that there might be **joy** in his regard as **over one sinner**.<sup>14</sup>

13. **So his father came out**, because God sent an admonition into him **and began to entreat him**, so that he might persevere in good. **But he answered** in his thoughts **and said to his father** God: **Behold, these many years**, that is, in a measured way and in moderation, **I have been serving you** in good things **and have never transgressed one of your commandments** by gainsaying it as my brother has. **Yet you have never given me a kid**, namely, he did not allow **that** just as sinners rejoice with their friends, **I might make merry with my friends**, namely, with the virtues, that is, so that I might enjoy as great a reputation for my good actions as this brother of mine has enjoyed for his conversion. **But when this your son**, who was created by you, **who devoured his means with prostitutes**, namely, who, by neglecting your commandments, rejected those works that were necessary for his soul and dissipated them with the mockeries of his insanity, **comes**, having made a righteous journey, **you killed the fattened calf for him**, that is, you anointed him with the passion of your Son in the abundance of life.

14. **But he**, namely, God, **said to him** in admonition: **Son**, namely, good knowledge, in happiness **you are always with me** and you do not desert me, **and all that is mine is yours**, namely, you have all good things, since I am good. **But we were bound to make merry and rejoice** in con-

<sup>14</sup> See Luke 15:7: "I say to you that, even so, there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, more than over ninety-nine just who have no need of repentance."

gratulation for the greening<sup>15</sup> of the Holy Spirit, because evil knowledge had converted itself to the good. For it is necessary that evil knowledge return to the good, where all the good things of the father are praised and are magnified in every creature.<sup>16</sup> It is like a warrior who overcomes an enemy, and the enemy will afterwards be his friend, compelled by the necessity that he will not be able to resist him, and therefore, the one conquered in his military service is to be praised. **For your brother was dead** in his iniquity **and has come to life** in acknowledgement of God, recalling to himself who caused him to be. **He was lost** through a faulty appraisal of reality, **and has been found** in the true light.



<sup>15</sup> "Gospel Homilies," 312 translates *viriditas* here by "renewing power."

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ps 103:24: "How magnified are your works, O Lord. You have made all things in wisdom. The earth is filled with your riches."

# **HENRY DAVID THOREAU: A TRULY SECULAR FRANCISCAN**

**LANCE B. RICHEY**

At first glance, the American essayist and naturalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) seems a most unlikely candidate for membership in the spiritual family of Saint Francis of Assisi. With his occasionally prickly personality and a (not entirely undeserved) reputation as a hermit and misanthrope, Thoreau lacked the charismatic personality that defined Francis and drew followers to him by the thousands. And, unlike the defender of orthodoxy and devoted son of the Church Francis, Thoreau spent his adult life as a lapsed Unitarian—no small feat, that!—and was a radical individualist in all matters spiritual and social. A lover of nature more than once accused of pantheism, Thoreau's respect for religion always stopped short of belief, and in any case extended more to the Buddhist and Hindu systems than to what he termed "the Christian fable."<sup>1</sup> Given all this, any kinship between Thoreau and the Franciscan family would appear to be a most remote one, perhaps a fourth cousin twice-removed, and more likely yet an instance of mistaken identity.

A more careful examination, though, reveals Thoreau to be a deeply religious—if unorthodox—man, and his seemingly anti-Christian statements, which some would use to disown him, as a reproof of the failings of nineteenth-century

<sup>1</sup> H.D. Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," in *Henry David Thoreau: A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden; The Main Woods; Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre, (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 54.

Christianity no less sincere than that of Francis six hundred years earlier. Indeed, if Thoreau's heterodox statements about God, so offensive on first hearing to pious ears, are judged against his religious milieu rather than that of Francis, they appear as defensible and at times necessary attacks on the deformations of Christian belief in his culture. Once his religious principles are properly understood, Thoreau's call for radical simplicity as both a personal virtue and as a requirement for true social justice can be seen as perhaps the most authentically Franciscan vision of the relationship of humanity to God and creation that America has yet produced.

In this paper a comprehensive account of Thoreau's life and thought is not possible, and has already been provided by others.<sup>2</sup> My more modest goal is to offer an appreciation and interpretation of Thoreau from a Franciscan perspective. As will become clear, his vision of God infusing and revealing himself in the created world, which is at the center of both his practical and political philosophies, more than qualifies him as at least a stepbrother of Francis.

## **I. "A COMPROMISED CHRISTIANITY": THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF THOREAU'S THOUGHT**

Thoreau was born and raised within a culture undergoing profound religious and intellectual transformations. From the early nineteenth century onward, New England's Puritan heritage came under the dual assault of a growing merchant economy and the gradual spread of Enlightenment Rationalism into the educational and religious systems of the time. The first result of these changes was the appearance of Unitarianism, which strove to reconcile Christianity with the scientific and social changes of the nineteenth century by abandoning major Christian doctrines. It was quickly succeeded by the more radical Transcendentalists, who objected

<sup>2</sup> R.D. Richardson, Jr., *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); S. Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1958).



"to what they perceived to be the sterile and already tradition-bound sect."<sup>3</sup> These three poles marked off the extremes of Thoreau's lived experience of Christianity (he had a quite limited knowledge of Catholicism, and "his visit to predominantly Catholic Montreal did not raise his opinion"<sup>4</sup> of it.) Not to recognize the cultural specificity of Thoreau's criticisms of Christianity, and to interpret them within the peculiar and somewhat narrow intellectual confines of his New England setting, is to invite the same misunderstandings that he experienced during his own life.

On an emotional level, Thoreau's antipathy towards traditional Christianity was fueled by its dour incarnation in the Calvinist traditions that had dominated New England from the Pilgrims onward, and his writings are filled with wry and at times bitter observations of the harsh religious culture into which he was born. Thoreau confessed that he was "slightly prejudiced against [the New Testament] in my very early days by the church and the Sabbath."<sup>5</sup> He never developed "any interest in church going. Rather, he learned to hate Sundays because of the Puritan custom that required children to spend the day indoors in meditation on the Bible."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Thoreau was always an astute student of religion, and "his Harvard education, as well as his earlier religious training, gave him a command of scripture that served as a keen weapon against what he perceived to be the apologetic and compromised Christianity of his age."<sup>7</sup> His unhappy childhood experiences are echoed in his reflections on the religious culture of Cape Cod:

<sup>3</sup> R. Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 15.

<sup>4</sup> R.J. Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau*, Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 146.

<sup>5</sup> Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 58.

<sup>6</sup> Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> R. Sattelmeyer, "Thoreau and Emerson" in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17.

The ecclesiastical history of this town interested us somewhat.... 'In 1665 the Court passed a law to inflict corporal punishment on all persons, who resided in the towns of this government, who denied the Scriptures.' Think of a man being whipped on a spring morning, till he was constrained to confess that the Scriptures were true! 'It was also voted by the town, that all persons who should stand out of the meeting-house during the time of divine service should be set in stocks.' It behooved such a town to see that sitting in the meeting-house was nothing akin to sitting in the stocks, lest the penalty of obedience to the law might be greater than that of disobedience.<sup>8</sup>

He also paid considerable attention to the line of Calvinist preachers who had shepherded the town in generations past by warning their flocks that, in Hell, "God himself shall be the principal agent in thy misery,—his breath is the bellows which blows up the flame of hell forever; ... Sinner, I beseech thee, realize the truth of these things. Do not go about to dream that this is derogatory to God's mercy.... though, to exalt the power of his justice, He damn sinners heaps upon heaps."<sup>9</sup> The dismal legacy of this Calvinism was summed up by the aging oysterman Thoreau met on Cape Cod, who insisted: "I am a nothing! What I gather from my Bible is just this: that man is a poor good-for-nothing crittur, and everything is just as God sees fit and disposes."<sup>10</sup> Given such a religious culture, one can at least better understand Thoreau's condemnation of the typical village church as "the ugliest looking building in it, because it is the one in which human nature stoops the lowest and is most disgraced."<sup>11</sup>

Having been born and educated in a culture heavily steeped in religious practice and debate, Thoreau, not sur-

<sup>8</sup> H.D. Thoreau, "Cape Cod," in *Henry David Thoreau: A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden; The Maine Woods; Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 880-81.

<sup>9</sup> Thoreau, "Cape Cod," 883.

<sup>10</sup> Thoreau, "Cape Cod," 906.

<sup>11</sup> Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 62.

prisingly, took an interest in spiritual matters. What could not have been predicted, though, were the depth of his religious feeling and the extent of his willingness to stand outside even the most expansive confines of Transcendentalism in his search for the divine. Not unlike Francis before him, in his search for God Thoreau challenged the entire religious establishment of his time not to settle for doctrines or systems, but actually to grasp the divine itself in nature.

## II. "THAT EVERLASTING SOMETHING": THOREAU'S SUPPOSED PANTHEISM

While he is popularly categorized as a Transcendentalist, Thoreau's religious beliefs across his forty-five years are a moving target that defies easy labels. His relationship to the major religious traditions of his time is complex and at times conflicted.

Thoreau's willingness to criticize these various religious systems from multiple and often contradictory perspectives suggests he was not attempting any kind of synthesis or an alternative system. The lack of system, though, is not the same as inconsistency. Thoreau's many criticisms are all based on his conviction that the Christianity of his day, even in its scarcely recognizable Transcendentalist version, had become an impediment to rather than an avenue for the experience of God that he found in nature. The Calvinist tradition, by its emphasis on sinful human nature, had positively obliterated the joy one should have at the simple fact of our existence and the goodness of God: "Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring him forever. One would say that even the prophets and redeemers had rather consoled the fears than confirmed the hopes of man. There is nowhere recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, any memorable praise of God."<sup>12</sup> The more intellectual Unitarian and Transcendentalist systems, on the other hand, had turned nature

<sup>12</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 384.

into a divine lesson book written by or, worse yet, a symbolic representation of the divinity who lies behind and apart from it. In both cases, nature becomes a barrier separating the human from the divine, rather than their nexus. Thoreau instead asks,

May we not *see* God? Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely? When the common man looks into the sky, which he has not so much profaned, he thinks it less gross than the earth, and with reverence speaks of "the Heavens," but the seer will in the same sense speak of "the Earths," and his Father who is in them. "Did not he that made that which is *within*, make that which is *without* also?"<sup>13</sup>

Against those systems that would separate God from nature and thus from us who live within nature, Thoreau insisted that God was really there, *in the world*, waiting to be experienced by those who would open their senses to him: "I see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves; the one historic truth, the most remarkable fact which can become the distinct and uninvited subject of our thought, the actual glory of the universe; the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing, or in some way forget or dispense with."<sup>14</sup> The divine presence, he tells us, suffuses all of nature: "Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. *Next* to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. *Next* to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are."<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, all otherworldliness, whether under the guise of traditional Christian theology or Transcendentalist metaphys-

<sup>13</sup> Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 310.

<sup>14</sup> Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 140.

<sup>15</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 429.

ics, misunderstands the fundamentally *worldly* character of human existence: "To the virtuous man, the universe is the only *sanctum sanctorum*, and the penetralia of the temple are the broad noon of his existence."<sup>16</sup> And when this encounter with the divine in nature occurs, "a mortal feels in himself Nature, not his Father but his Mother stirs within him, and he becomes immortal with her immortality."<sup>17</sup>

These comments, going considerably beyond the carefully calibrated praises of Nature by Emerson, opened Thoreau to the charge of a "misplaced Pantheistic attack on the Christian faith."<sup>18</sup> One biographer has suggested that the label of pantheist was not "essentially inaccurate. Thoreau was certainly no Christian in any commonly accepted sense."<sup>19</sup> His situation was not helped by his inability to resist the poetic turn of phrase, of which he was a master, when describing his emotional response to nature. For instance, in his famous ode to a pine tree in *The Maine Woods*, he writes, "It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high as heaven, there to tower above me still."<sup>20</sup> When this work was serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the editor refused to publish it despite Thoreau's protests.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in *Walden* he describes the religious character of his experience of nature in literally biblical language: "Ah! I have penetrated to those meadows on the morning of many a first spring day, jumping from hummock to hummock, from willow root to willow root, when the wild river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead, if they had been slumbering in their graves, as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality. All things must live in such a light. O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory, then?"<sup>22</sup> His artistry here is remarkable:

<sup>16</sup> Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 253.

<sup>17</sup> Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 306.

<sup>18</sup> Paul, *Thoreau's Inward Exploration*, 219 n. 151.

<sup>19</sup> Richardson, *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, 286.

<sup>20</sup> Thoreau, "The Maine Woods," 685.

<sup>21</sup> J.J. Moldenhauer, "The Maine Woods," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 128.

<sup>22</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 575.

"These motifs of morning and light merge quite smoothly with traditional Christian symbols of resurrection, so that by the conclusion of the book Thoreau is no longer the comic outsider or the outcast prophet-preacher, but rather a welcome herald announcing a familiar concept of rebirth in familiar language."<sup>23</sup>

In the final analysis, making the charge of pantheism against Thoreau seems unfair to what was really a much more complex and nuanced understanding of God's place in nature, though one often expressed with much less precision than we might desire. Just as with his attitude towards the benevolence or malevolence of nature, so too Thoreau equivocated occasionally on the place of God in it: "Thoreau's idea that humans could see God in nature was in fact ambivalent as well as ambiguous.... This juggling of two contradictory views of nature seems to bother many critics more than it is likely to have bothered Thoreau.... Like Emerson he believed that a mystical, transcendent vision of reality was possible. Although we might not be able to see God, Thoreau generally believed that we could."<sup>24</sup> In this respect, Thoreau's ambiguous position is not dissimilar to that of Francis when he called on the reader to give praise to God (in the original Italian) *per* creation in the *Canticle of the Sun*. The problem there is that

Francis uses the preposition *per* which, as it stands in this poem, can actually have a number of quite different meanings. Does it mean "for" ... in the sense of thanksgiving for the gifts of God? Does it mean "by" indicating that the sun and the other elements are instruments which give praise to God? Does it mean "through" which also indicated instrumentality but also the deeper sense of indicating the presence of God in all creation as Saint Bonaventure would teach some decades later? Recent scholars have conceded

<sup>23</sup> Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau*, 36.



that any of those renderings is legitimate from a theological point of view.<sup>25</sup>

While Thoreau was no Francis—indeed, he did not even consider himself a Christian—“much of his love of nature is expressed in language devoid of conventional religious terminology, but no less religious in feeling for that.”<sup>26</sup> And the spirituality of nature that he was trying to express seems more than passingly Franciscan, especially since he encountered the same difficulty in clearly sorting out the complex relationships of the natural world to God as Francis did. Furthermore, when one sees how this spirituality fed Thoreau’s demand for simplicity and a rejection of materialism, the similarities become even more pronounced.

### III. “RICH IN PROPORTION”: THOREAU’S POVERTY

Thoreau’s fame rests primarily on his account in *Walden* of the two years he spent living alone on the shores of Emerson’s Walden Pond, a mile outside of the town of Concord, in a one-room cabin of his own construction. Unfortunately, his experiment in living has been so sentimentalized and sanitized by popular culture that, when most readers first approach *Walden*, they expect to find in it either “a hermit sitting meditatively by Walden Pond”<sup>27</sup> or, worse yet, a cuddly “environmentalist saint”<sup>28</sup> not unlike what Francis has become in the public mind. Thoreau was neither of these, and certainly not some Christian holy man fleeing to the wilderness to seek his salvation in the next life. Rather, he tells us (with a typical jab at Christian orthodoxy),

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I

<sup>25</sup> L.S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 101-02.

<sup>26</sup> Richardson, *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, 286.

<sup>27</sup> Schneider, “Walden,” 92.

<sup>28</sup> Buell, 1995, 171.

could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to live what was not life, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”<sup>29</sup>

But, for a man of Thoreau’s religious temperament, there could be no more holy or pious motive in life than this. Therefore, his accomplishment at Walden Pond should be seen as the practical expression of his most fundamental religious beliefs, since “to be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.”<sup>30</sup>

Just as Thoreau’s understanding of God was formed in reaction to his particular religious context, so too his decision to live in the woods was made in response to the obsession with wealth that accompanied the rapidly expanding economy of Massachusetts in the 1840s. Far from elevating his fellow citizens, all this wealth and activity seemed to Thoreau more like a curse from God:

I have traveled a good deal in Concord; and every where, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have

<sup>29</sup> Thoreau, “Walden,” 394-95.

<sup>30</sup> Thoreau, “Walden,” 334.

appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways.... I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools, for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil?... How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot!<sup>31</sup>

Worse still, this punishment was inflicted on its victims not out of necessity but by their free choice, "as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think that there is no choice left."<sup>32</sup> "But," Thoreau tells us, "men labor under a mistake.... They are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures that moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it."<sup>33</sup>

Thoreau's experience was a common one: "all around him [he] saw his Concord neighbors—farmers, merchants, perhaps even his own father—obsessed with economic survival while they ignored the question of whether making money was the really most important purpose in life."<sup>34</sup> His reaction, though, was far from common. Disgusted by all this busyness, Thoreau went to Walden Pond "to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them.... By the words, *necessary of life*, I mean whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so impor-

<sup>31</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 326-27.

<sup>32</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 329.

<sup>33</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 327.

<sup>34</sup> Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau*, 34.

tant to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it."<sup>35</sup> He discovered while there that "most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor."<sup>36</sup> And, like Francis before him, Thoreau chose to make his highest virtue that which is always most available and least in demand: "poverty, i.e. simplicity of life and fewness of incidents."<sup>37</sup>

Thoreau did not intend by his solitary and simple life at Walden Pond to renounce this world but to prepare himself for a deeper and more spiritual encounter with the God who infused all of nature. It was for him a form of spiritual discipline no less important than Francis's withdrawal to a cave for prayer: "You think that I am impoverishing myself by withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or *chrysalis*, and, nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society. By simplicity, commonly called poverty, my life is concentrated and so becomes organized, or a *kosmos*, which before was inorganic and lumpish."<sup>38</sup> It certainly was not a form of sloth, a refusal to do the hard work of living, which some mistook it for. By stripping away the inessentials which society has mistaken for necessities, Thoreau was doing harder labor than any of his contemporaries, without enjoying the conveniences and luxuries with which they have surrounded themselves. This refusal to take the easier path in life *was* his renunciation, and an essential part of his spiritual journey: "Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 332.

<sup>36</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 334.

<sup>37</sup> Thoreau, *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals*, 263.

<sup>38</sup> Thoreau, *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals*, 267.

<sup>39</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 353.

Poverty or simplicity, with all its hardships, was for Thoreau only the means to yet a higher end for human life, though "few who have taken this Thoreau for their ideal have seen the extent to which his repudiation of materialism was also a repudiation of expediency, and how much simplicity or poverty, as he called it, was a condition of conscience and virtue."<sup>40</sup>

Thoreau saw clearly that no amount of wealth and financial security can purchase a proper relationship with the world or a meaningful life, and that "superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul."<sup>41</sup> He never ceased to wonder at "this spending of the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it, [which] reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet."<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, Thoreau insisted, it is only by reducing our material needs to the bare necessities that we can find the freedom to cultivate a life of the spirit, since "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, "It is foolish for a man to accumulate material wealth chiefly, houses, and land. Our stock in life, our real estate, is that amount of thought which we have had, which we have thought out. The ground which we have thus created is forever pasturage for our thoughts. I fall back on to visions which I have had. What else adds to my possessions and makes me rich in all lands?"<sup>44</sup>

Following the path of poverty enables one to live and to think "*extra-vagantly*" (literally, wandering outside of one's borders), "to break the physical, mental, and spiritual boundaries that limit our perception of and relation to wild

nature."<sup>45</sup> Thoreau worries in *Walden* that "my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced."<sup>46</sup> But one can never get outside of one's borders by enlarging them, nor can one establish a natural relation with the world through so human an arrangement as private ownership: "To enjoy a thing exclusively is commonly to exclude yourself from the true enjoyment of it.... In short, all good things are wild and free."<sup>47</sup> What is necessary for true spiritual progress, therefore, is to abandon the common belief that true enjoyment of a thing requires the ownership of it. This is a radical rejection by Thoreau not of the world but of the inability most people have to ever properly enjoy it. In an epigram that would warm the heart of Francis, Thoreau declares: "One who knew how to appropriate the true value of this world would be the poorest man in it. The poor rich man! all he has is what he has bought. What I see is mine."<sup>48</sup>

Thoreau's celebration of poverty was his most deeply religious act, the declaration of his personal crusade to reclaim a kind of holy land from the commercial culture that had reduced the entirety of life and nature to a list of commodities to be bought at the lowest and sold at the highest price. In waging war upon the common attitude that instrumentalizes nature and makes impossible any experience of the divinity within it, Thoreau "wanted to make his generation take the step from commodity to spirit."<sup>49</sup> Thus, in *The Maine Woods* he laments the intrusion of the logging industry whereby "few ever come to the woods to see how the pine lives and grows and spires, lifting its evergreen arms to the light,—to see its perfect success; but most are content to behold it

<sup>40</sup> Paul, *Thoreau's Inward Exploration*, 238-39.

<sup>41</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 584.

<sup>42</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 365.

<sup>43</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 387.

<sup>44</sup> Thoreau, *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals*, 269.

<sup>45</sup> R.W. Hoag, "Thoreau's Later Natural History Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 153.

<sup>46</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 580.

<sup>47</sup> H.D. Thoreau, "Walking," in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: The Library of America, 2001), 233, 246.

<sup>48</sup> Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 285.

<sup>49</sup> Paul, *Thoreau's Inward Exploration*, 230.



in the shape of many broad boards brought to market, and deem *that* its true success!"<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Thoreau had no patience for the typical farmer who looks at a field in spring and sees only its likely yield in autumn: "I respect not his labors, his farm where everything has its price; ... whose fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars."<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, Thoreau's conception of poverty cannot be understood apart from his understanding of God as being revealed through the natural world. The virtue of poverty, for Thoreau, is that it enables one, as Martin Heidegger would say, to "let Being be," rather than attempt to transform, exploit, and ultimately destroy it in "an endless cycle of getting and spending, producing and consuming."<sup>52</sup> In other words, for Thoreau, poverty lets nature be God, instead of having to be ours. For, even when the goal is the simple use of nature, and not its complete spoliation, "almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap."<sup>53</sup> To Thoreau, such a "violent assault on nature was ... the most obvious sign of man's want of faith."<sup>54</sup> If the faith which he desired wanders outside the boundaries of historic Christianity—and why should we be surprised if his faith was so extravagant?—that makes it no less religious. Even the harshest critic of his brand of religion would have to admit that Thoreau, just like Francis, "was far more willing than most of his nominally Christian contemporaries to take seriously and literally the New Testament injunctions to live by faith and to eschew accumulating worldly goods."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Thoreau, "The Maine Woods," 684.

<sup>51</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 479.

<sup>52</sup> Richardson, *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, 168.

<sup>53</sup> Thoreau, "Walking," 230.

<sup>54</sup> Paul, *Thoreau's Inward Exploration*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Sattelmeyer, "Thoreau and Emerson," 17.

#### IV: "THE ONLY TRUE AMERICA": THOREAU ON AMERICAN SOCIETY

Since the 1960s Thoreau has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity as new generations of readers have discovered in him a critic of an industrial capitalist economy that too often has sacrificed both social justice and the environment to a culture of unbridled acquisition and consumption.<sup>56</sup> Reformers as diverse as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. have drawn on the principles in his essay "Civil Disobedience" in their non-violent struggles against racism and colonialism in the twentieth century.<sup>57</sup>

At the heart of Thoreau's critique of American society is his conviction that its chief problem is not a lack of material wealth, but rather the near-universal absence of the sense to use and value wealth properly. The discovery of which things in life are necessities and which are luxuries, that "private business" which Thoreau had gone to Walden Pond to transact "with the fewest obstacles,"<sup>58</sup> is everywhere neglected, and at what cost! He writes, "Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives. This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no Sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work."<sup>59</sup> All this busyness was unnecessary, Thoreau thought: "In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely...." But as it stands now, "men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessities, but for want of luxuries."<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> W. Harding, "Thoreau's Reputation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9-10.

<sup>57</sup> L. Gougeon, "Thoreau and Reform," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 201; Harding, "Thoreau's Reputation," 8.

<sup>58</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 338.

<sup>59</sup> Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," 348.

<sup>60</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 371, 378.

Thoreau's almost glib dismissal of the difficulties faced by most people in keeping body and soul together can be discomfiting to his readers. Concord society had more than its share of very real and degrading poverty, of which neither Thoreau nor his readers could plausibly claim ignorance:

To know this I should not need to look farther than to the shanties which every where border our railroads, that last improvement in civilization; where I see on my daily walks human beings living in sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake of light, without any visible, often imaginable, wood pile, and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties are checked. It certainly is fair to look at that class by whose labor the works which distinguish this generation are accomplished.<sup>61</sup>

This sort of poverty was not the virtue to which he thought anyone should aspire, and he passed harsh judgment upon the society permitting it to continue. However, despite his genuine sympathy for the poor, Thoreau had no inclination to join those movements dedicated to alleviating their condition because he believed they were not aimed at curing the disease afflicting American society but only treating its symptoms, in the process making things worse: "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root, and it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce the misery that he strives in vain to relieve."<sup>62</sup>

The material condition of the poor is only a symptom of the deeper spiritual poverty that afflicts every level of society, including also—Thoreau might say, *especially*—"that seemingly wealthy, but most terrible impoverished class of all,

<sup>61</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 350.

<sup>62</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 382.

who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters."<sup>63</sup>

If there is to be any reform of society, it must take place at the level of the individual, one person at a time, through the arduous process of self-reform: "The price of virtue still had to be paid in the immemorial way, by the sweat of the brow. Self-reform, which was Thoreau's way of reforming the outward life, emphasized ... that man himself must do the work: the strong iron rod of Puritanism had a place in his thought."<sup>64</sup> Far from causing the neglect of social ills, the reformation of self is the truest social reform, since "Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine."<sup>65</sup>

In key respects, what Thoreau was seeking in his project of self-reform, like Francis, was not just a private task, but also a renewal of an authentic and integral social existence. It is a mistake to see his resistance to urban civilization and his longing for an earlier and pre-industrial stage of society as mere nostalgia or romanticism. Rather, it is an attempt to recreate the kind of human relations which the materialism of the modern world has made difficult if not impossible to sustain, namely, "a true community, small enough to be fully comprehended, made up of self-reliant, idiosyncratic individuals, whose self-reliance would be nurtured by familiar association and mutual respect."<sup>66</sup>

Thoreau is not being a hopeless idealist in his criticism of modern society, nor does he wish to impose his own primitivism upon everyone else—though he, like Francis, does invite everyone to embrace it. His goal was not to dismantle

<sup>63</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 335.

<sup>64</sup> Paul, *Thoreau's Inward Exploration*, 153.

<sup>65</sup> Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," 210.

<sup>66</sup> M.E. Moller, *Thoreau in the Human Community*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, 89-90.

the modern world, but to propose a path of self-reform and simplicity that can enable its inhabitants to rediscover those higher values and spiritual realities which they have been separated from. Thoreau "has no quarrel with the essential task of the lumber industry and is prepared to admire lumberjacks for their life on the edge of the frontier. After all, he himself had cleared Emerson's land at the pond to get lumber to build his cabin. It is the corruption of the endeavor he criticizes. If society would build simpler houses, lumber would not be needed in such outrageous quantities."<sup>67</sup> The question obviously is not, "Shall we have houses?" Rather, Thoreau writes, "Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have.... Shall we always study to obtain more of these things, and not sometimes to be content with less?"<sup>68</sup>

Just as poverty was Thoreau's path back to nature, it was simultaneously his path back to an authentic social existence as well. By his example of poverty, Thoreau calls his fellow citizens back to "the only true America," as he calls "that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly and indirectly result from the use of such things."<sup>69</sup> Thus, in the truest sense, his ultimate wish for his neighbors truly was *Pace e Bene*.

## CONCLUSION

In the *Introduction*, it was claimed that "Thoreau's call for radical simplicity as both a personal virtue and as a requirement for true social justice can be seen as perhaps the most authentically Franciscan vision of the relationship of

<sup>67</sup> Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau*, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 351.

<sup>69</sup> Thoreau, "Walden," 486.

humanity to God and creation that America has yet produced." Certainly, Thoreau was no Saint Francis—how could a lapsed Unitarian be that? But when we consider his belief that poverty or simplicity, the radical stripping down of one's needs and desires, is the only way to renew our relationships with God, nature, and humanity as a whole, he certainly looks very Franciscan. Despite an aversion to doctrine that placed him outside even the Unitarian church, Thoreau's determination to lead a life stripped bare to make room for God bears much more than a passing resemblance to the *Poverello* of Assisi. Robert Collyer, the Unitarian clergyman whom Thoreau visited shortly before his death, saw in him nothing less than a secular and American Saint Francis:

Henry Thoreau of Concord, the Diogenes of this new world, the Hermit of Walden Woods. The gentle and loving misanthrope and apostle of individualism so singular and separate that I do not know where to look for his father or son—the most perfect instance to be found I think of American independence run to seed, or shall we say a mild variety which is very fair to look on but can never sow itself for another harvest. The man of natural mind which was *not* enmity against God, but in a great and wide sense was subject to the law of God and to no other law. The saint of the *bright* ages and the own brother in this to the Saint of the dark ages, who called the wild creatures that run and fly his sisters and brothers, and was more intimate with them than he was with our own human kind.<sup>70</sup>

This is just as romanticized and secularized an image of Thoreau as it is of Francis, no doubt, but one with more than a grain of truth. Just as Francis had gone crusading in search of salvation, so too Thoreau invited his readers to join him on crusade and "saunter towards the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done,

<sup>70</sup> R. Collyer, "Thoreau," in *Thoreau as Seen by His Contemporaries*, ed. Walter Harding (New York: Dover, 1989), 130.



shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn."<sup>71</sup>



<sup>71</sup> Thoreau, "Walking," 255.

## RECONCILING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ISLAM

CLARE JULIAN CARBONE, O.S.C.

The Church struggles today to clarify her relationship with Islam. How is it possible to remain faithful to the fullness of the Gospel while extending clear gestures of solidarity to Muslims? Yet the urgent call to do so was given in 1965 at the time of the Second Vatican Council. Of religions in general, the Council asserted: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these Religions." Of her particular relationship with Islam, the Council admonition reads in part:

Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom. (*Nostra aetate*, October 28, 1965, Section 3).<sup>1</sup>

The call to announce the Gospel and the call to achieve understanding and promote peace among the Muslim people are sacred inspired callings. It has been more natural, however, for Catholics to experience a sacred affinity with our Jewish brothers and sisters and the heritage that gave us Jesus and Mary. This article will, it is hoped, offer ways of approaching Islam with a similar sense of sacred regard and

<sup>1</sup> "Nostra aetate," *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 663.

gratitude in the context of our Catholic-Franciscan way of life.

### ST. FRANCIS AND THE MUSLIM MYSTICS

One does not always realize the richness of the spirituality underlying Islam until one discovers Sufism. Sufism leads into the heart of Islam, which is the heart of friendship with God. This ancient mystical tradition, which some believe actually existed prior to the formal establishment of Islam,<sup>2</sup> is a rich link to Judaism, to our Catholic and Franciscan roots, and ultimately to the esoteric threads common to all mystical spirituality. Steeped in friendship with God as he was, St. Francis would have found many soul mates among the Muslim mystics, and may have had the opportunity to develop these spiritual friendships during his extended visit to the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> It is quite feasible that Francis fostered significant relationships beyond the one with the Sultan Malek al-Kamil of Egypt with which we are commonly familiar.<sup>4</sup> Because of the lack of records during this time of Francis's life we may never fully know the extent of these relationships or the healing value they have had upon our world.

Approaching Islam, from a Franciscan perspective and the implied relationships Francis likely fostered among its people, allows one to prayerfully reconsider Islam's basic confession of faith, known as the Shahadah, "There is no God but God (Allah), and Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Allah is the Semitic Arabic term meaning God, and is equivalent to the Hebrew word for God: Elohim or Yahweh. In the traditional Arabic language, a formal Muslim profession

<sup>2</sup> Idries Shau makes this assertion several times in his book, *The Sufis* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> St. Francis visited the Middle East for approximately one year, having sailed for Damietta in June of 1219, having left Damietta for the Holy Land and Syria in November, and having returned to Italy in July, 1220. See Paul Sabatier, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1930), 226-38; and Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 396, 436.

<sup>4</sup> See Kathleen Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold* (Rochester, MN: Sisters of St. Francis, 2003).

of faith would sound something like, "La ilaha illa llah, Muhammed razul Allah." To profess this with a sincere heart, one may be considered Muslim. The prospects of the Church acknowledging the validity of this statement, of accepting it as part of what is "true and holy" in Islam, carries significant hope for healing our wounded past with Islam and fostering peaceful and fruitful relationships for the future. One may ask, how is it possible to accept the Muslim tenet of faith if one is truly Catholic?

### THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD

As a Catholic, it is fairly simple to acknowledge that there is no God but God – Catholicism itself being an offshoot of the great monotheistic tradition of Judaism whose initial purpose was to counter pagan ideologies and practices and to establish a covenant of peace between God and the Chosen People. In this matter there exists no real conflict between Catholicism and the basic creed of Islam that "Allah (God) alone is God." It would be the equivalent of a Catholic professing, "The Lord alone is God. There is no God but God." We hear this acclamation often repeated in the Jewish prophets, "I am the Lord your God. Beside me there is no other God" (Deut. 4:5; Isa. 43:10-11). On this level, in terms of our worship of the One True God, Christianity, Judaism and Islam join in communion.

Catholics profess a particular understanding of the One God by belief in the Trinity: Creator, Word become flesh, and Life-Sustaining Holy Spirit. The main difficulty for Christian and Muslim lies in our different understanding of the person of Jesus. Islam regards Jesus as a prophet of God and does not accept any claim of Jesus' Divinity. The Christian, on the other hand, accepts both the divinity and humanity of Christ without compromising a belief in the One True God. Though the Trinity poses a stumbling block for both the Muslim and the Jew, it is interesting to observe how each of these traditions express, in some way, the multiplicity and diversified oneness of God's Being.

For instance, within the tradition of Islam there is the common practice of recalling to mind the "99 Names for God." God is understood, revered and remembered in the context of an array of titles or names. These titles often bear opposite qualities: Allah is referred to as the Giver of Life (Al-Muhyi) and the Causer of Death (Al-Mumit); likewise, the Abaser (Al-Khafid), and the Exalter (Ar-Rafi). Thus, even within the Islamic tradition which strongly proclaims the Oneness and Unity of God, there exists the natural tendency to refer to the One (Al-Wajid) God in terms of multiple, and even oppositional, aspects of God's Being.

Also of significance are the numerous occasions contained within the Sacred Qur'an where Allah refers to God's Self in the plural, as "We" and "Us." These expressions of plurality used by God in reference to God's Self are reminiscent of the Creation account recorded in the Book of Genesis where, "God said, Let Us make humankind in Our image, in the likeness of Ourselves" (Gen 1:26). The Hebrew noun used for God in this instance is "Elohim," a title denoting plurality and literally translated "the Gods." One may accurately read, "The Gods said, Let Us make humankind in Our image, in the likeness of Ourselves." It is worth noting that "Elohim" is not matched with a plural verb as would be grammatically expected. Instead the singular form of the verb is used. "Wherever Elohim is used (which is quite extensively) this is the plural form, and it is linked with singular verbs. This occurs everywhere throughout the Torah."<sup>5</sup> We may conclude therefore that in both Muslim and Hebrew Scriptures, God is notably presented in terms of unified singularity coupled with multiplicity. To Jew and Muslim, this pluralistic language is suggestive primarily of the supreme Majesty of God, comparable to how one might regard the grandeur of royalty, but does not denote plurality of Persons as is attributed to the Trinity. To the Christian, on the other hand, the Trinity reveals a glimpse not only of the mystery of God's supremacy and diversity, but of God's Eternal Love, and the Communion

of that Love, as it exists within God. This Love is manifested to humanity by way of the Incarnation, and God's Self-Giving invitation to participate in this Love is extended to us by way of the Holy Spirit. Yet All is the One True God.

From a Catholic perspective, therefore, there exists no contradiction in espousing the first basic tenet of Islam: "There is no God but God." The Sacred writings of all three monotheistic traditions attempt to reveal to us the complexity of God's Being. Yet all three traditions claim to worship the One, True, Absolute, Creator God.

But what of Islam's second tenet of faith? How is a Catholic to regard the person of Muhammad? Is it possible for a Catholic to embrace the belief that Muhammad is a prophet or messenger of God?

#### MUHAMMAD AS GOD'S MESSENGER

Varying responses to this question have been given for hundreds of years. Muslims hold the deepest reverence and regard for their prophet. They believe he was the human instrument through whom God revealed the Living Word, the Qur'an, and honored them by doing so in the context of their sacred, ancient Arabic language. Their regard for Muhammad is as sacred as is the Christian's towards Jesus and the Jew's towards Moses. It behooves us to treat this sacred relationship with utmost respect. Some individuals outside the realm of Islam and removed from this essential dynamic insist that Muhammad was the founder of a violent religion and the bringer of evil. Our own Pope Innocent III, as well as revered saints such as Bernard of Clairvaux, of the thirteenth century held such opinions.<sup>6</sup> Others simply concede that Muhammad established a tenet of faith for a people who would otherwise have remained in the grip of primitive pagan beliefs and practices.

<sup>5</sup> In correspondence with Reb Leah Campola, Rabbinic Pastor with smicha [ordination] from Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 7-42.



In letters referred to in the scholarly work by Guilio Bassetti-Sani, O.F.M.,<sup>7</sup> French-Catholic professor of Islam Abec C. Ledit suggests that Muhammad's role was indeed prophetic in that he established a religion "whose path leads in the direction of Christ ..." and that we must, as Christians, "find the key to understanding this in the Qur'an, as we did in the Bible." He further suggests that the purpose of Islam, in part, is to "challenge Israel to review its judgment of the Messiah, and to spur the Church to rid herself of her divisions." These insightful observations as to the nature of Islam's purpose, from a Christian perspective, are worthy of our serious consideration. If as Christians we come to understand Islam as a path that is leading – albeit obscurely, as does Judaism – towards the direction of Christ, and by so doing challenges the Jewish misgivings of the Messiah, and the divisions of the Christian Church, perhaps we may be more apt to recognize the prophetic calling of Muhammad. As we shed further light on this prospect we would do well to consider the origin of the Muslim people, the descendants of Ishmael.

#### ISHMAEL AND GOD'S COVENANT

According to the record in the Book of Genesis, Ishmael was the first-born son of Abraham by his maidservant, Hagar. As a first-born son, Ishmael shared in the covenant God made with Abraham. At the age of thirteen he was circumcised, as a token of the covenant, along with Abraham and his household as God required (Gen 17:7-26). At the time of this event, Abraham received the second of two blessings regarding Ishmael and his progeny. God said to Abraham,

For Ishmael, too, I grant you your request: I bless him and I will make him fruitful and greatly increased in

<sup>7</sup> Guilio Bassetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), 35.

numbers. He shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.<sup>8</sup>

Yahweh's first blessing for Ishmael was given through his mother Hagar prior to his birth. Genesis records that Hagar, having suffered prolonged mistreatment from Sarah, proceeded to run away from her. On her journey Hagar encountered Yahweh who admonished her to return to Sarah, comforting her with the following blessing:

I will make your descendants too numerous to be counted. Go back to your mistress and submit to her. Now you have conceived, and you will bear a son, and you shall name him Ishmael, for Yahweh has heard your cries of distress. A wild-donkey of a man he will be, against every man, and every man against him, setting himself to defy all his brothers (Gen 16:10-12).

Hagar did indeed as Yahweh directed. She returned to her mistress, gave birth to Ishmael and raised him for some time in that setting. However, after giving birth to her own son Isaac, Sarah convinced Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away to the desert. In doing this, Sarah seemed to be motivated by a fearful concern of competition between her son and Hagar's, and it remains a great dilemma as to how to judge the harshness of her request.<sup>9</sup> Gustave Dore portrays the severity of this bitter exile vividly in his painting "Hagar

<sup>8</sup> God's covenant with Isaac (Gen 17:21), in comparison, involves the specific promise that the Messiah would eventually be born through Isaac's lineage.

<sup>9</sup> The exile of Hagar and Ishmael, prompted by Sarah, may be considered inspired as it relates both to the necessary experience known as "separatio" in alchemy, and as "separation-individuation" in psychology. These processes act as a catalyst for differentiation of the elements or personality involved. Psychologically, we may say that the phase of separation is needed to bring to the surface the truest elements of one's being, as well as greater levels of consciousness. Though a necessary stage of development it is usually marked with significant conflict, aspects of which we are witnessing on a grander scale within the entities of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. See Edward Edinger, *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemi-*

and Ishmael in the Desert." Genesis tells us, "God was with the boy" and "Hagar chose for him a wife from the land of Egypt", (Gen 21:20-21). The last we hear of Ishmael is that he and Isaac together buried their father Abraham, (Gen. 25:9). Many have come to believe that the two blessings which God extended to Ishmael through his parents, have found their fulfillment in the proliferation of the Muslim people.

## ON ALIENATION

The experience of abandonment and of being permanently cast out from one's familial roots and spiritual/cultural lineage would have devastating effects upon any individual or group of individuals. With no further connectedness to these essential, fundamental life-structures, Hagar, Ishmael and their descendants would sustain deep and irreparable wounding to their sense of identity and belonging. This wounding would find its expression in severely conflicted relationships over time.

In his book *Ego and Archetype*, Jungian analyst Edward Edinger addresses the profound effects of alienation. He writes, "Wherever one experiences an unbearable alienation and despair (similar to what Ishmael experienced) it is followed by violence.... At the root of violence of any form lies the experience of alienation – a rejection too severe to be endured."<sup>10</sup> This insight offers us an opening for understanding alienation as the primary cause of extreme forms of violence and acts of terrorism. Perhaps it may also lead to the healing responses needed? It is worth addressing the specific blessing given to Hagar on behalf of Ishmael, as it relates to this issue.

In the prophetic encounter between Hagar and Yahweh, we are made aware of God's compassionate response to the plight she bore. God's personal appearance to her is quite

unconventional.<sup>11</sup> God blesses her with the promise of a son who will bear the name that means Yahweh knows her desperation and has heard her cries of distress. Ishmael's progeny will be too numerous to number. Yahweh also makes known to Hagar that Ishmael's descendants will experience conflict especially in relationship to their brothers, the descendants of Isaac. Yahweh indicates to Hagar the inevitability of the contentious relationship to unfold between Ishmael's and Isaac's progeny, assuring her that each will play out his part. In particular God predicts that Ishmael will become a "wild-donkey of a man."

The Hebrew word "wild" may more accurately be translated as "free running" or "fruitful," and not necessarily hostile or angry.<sup>12</sup> But what is to be made of the image of the donkey? Is a deeper meaning implied by this image? As one ponders this question one may recall to mind Jesus riding on a donkey during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This event was significant enough to be recorded in all four Gospels.<sup>13</sup> As one ponders this scene, one may begin to notice representations of the three Abrahamic traditions emerging: Jesus, the center of Christianity, entering Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, riding peacefully on a donkey, the image of Ishmael's sons, the center of Islam. Is it possible to view this event as a subliminal, symbolic image of a future integration and blessing intended for Ishmael and his progeny? Could this event be a foreshadowing of the Peace of Christ that would eventually rest on the descendants of Ishmael, and lovingly lead them back to that familial relationship with the descendants of Isaac? Could Ishmael's descendants be the "other sheep" whom Christ must lead and return to the fold (John 10:16)? Perhaps these images contained in the Gospels are not incidental. Perhaps they are meant to lead to an awareness that God has not forgotten Ishmael or his

<sup>11</sup> Yahweh did not directly appear to Sarah or other women (Gen 18:9-15).

<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew word *pere*, *pereh*, may be translated as "free running" or "fruitful." See *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), Hebrew Dictionary, notes 6500 and 6501.

<sup>13</sup> Matt 21:1 ff; Mark 11:1 ff; Luke 19:28 ff; John 12:12ff.

*cal Symbolism in Psychotherapy* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1985), 183 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Edinger, *Ego and Archetype*, (Boston, MA: Shambala Press, 1992), 44.



descendants; that they belong to Yahweh no less than all the tribes of Israel (Zech 9:1); that God has indeed heard the cries of Hagar through the centuries, and that her son Ishmael and Sarah's son Isaac, and their progeny, are meant to be reunited in God's Kingdom, through the humility of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

### ISA AND MARYAM

The Muslim people universally possess deep regard and reverence for both Jesus and his mother, referred to in the Arabic as Isa and Maryam.<sup>15</sup> They embrace the virgin birth,<sup>16</sup> and regard Jesus as a great prophet, attributing to him alone the title of Messiah, a title not yet fully comprehended. In essence, one may say that the alienation and rejection experienced by Hagar and Ishmael is similar to that which Jesus and Mary experienced among their own people. Muslims hold that Mary was alone when she gave birth to Jesus in a desert setting, having been shunned by those who believed she had conceived out of wedlock.<sup>17</sup> Muslims are unable at this time to accept Jesus as the human image of the invisible God, as Christians do. That Christ is the supreme expression of Divine Love by which God reconciled all things on the Cross is, to the Muslim, a contradiction of how they understand God. As a people, however, most Muslims graciously acknowledge "Every word that Jesus, peace be upon him, spoke during his ministry was the Word of Allah Almighty, because the Holy Spirit literally took over his tongue."<sup>18</sup> The Muslim people, therefore, find great comfort and a sense of restored identity

<sup>14</sup> The NIV Archeological Study Bible makes the distinction that the donkey is an image of peace and humility, as opposed to the horse, which was associated with war and military endeavor. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), Cultural Notes: 1595.

<sup>15</sup> Qur'an Sura 111:45.

<sup>16</sup> Qur'an Sura 111:47.

<sup>17</sup> Portrayed in the Muslim film, *The Honorable St. Mary* (Jamaica, NY: Alloo Productions, Al-Khoel Foundation).

<sup>18</sup> Paraphrased from *The Noble Qu'ran*, 2:87; accessed from [http://yadayahweh.net/blessed\\_jesus.htm](http://yadayahweh.net/blessed_jesus.htm).

in their regard for Jesus and Mary. As followers of Jesus we possess a great responsibility of participating in the mission of receiving them back to the fold.

In light of these observations, Catholics may begin to understand Muhammad as someone called by God to establish a religion whose purpose was multifaceted. At the very least, we may concede that by means of the Sacred Qur'an which he transmitted, Muhammad redirected the pagan practices of a primitive people toward a unified worship of the One God, similar to what Abraham and Moses did for the Jews. To this we may add another calling, that of specifically reclaiming for God Hagar, Ishmael and his descendants, who underwent a most severe and unjust abandonment and alienation and for whom God seemingly intends full restoration to the fold. The Muslim people, as we acknowledge, are keenly identified with Jesus and Mary as part of this restorative process. To this we add the startling suggestion that God's purpose in calling Muhammad to establish this religion is to challenge the Jewish people's resistance of Jesus as the Messiah, and to call to conversion the many divisions among Christians. If we concede Muhammad's prophetic calling – and these reasons strongly compel this response – then what are the ramifications of such an acknowledgment?

In accepting Muhammad as a prophet and messenger of God, the church could begin the healing process for a people who have been scorned and alienated for most of recorded history. By opening space within our own spirituality to validate the Muslim experience, we not only fulfill the admonition of the Second Vatican Council to promote peace and understanding with our Muslim brothers and sisters, but we also participate in restoring Islam's rightful place as one expression of God's covenant with Abraham. Lastly, we fulfill Jesus' challenge to seek out and restore what once was lost.

### CHRIST AS AN ENIGMA TO CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM

It is not unique to Muslims that Christ is an enigma. The Christian also has difficulty in practicing the non-violence



and the I-I relationship<sup>19</sup> modeled by Jesus, even to death on the cross. Ironically, some of our own popes and saints have borne the banner of power and violence in response to religious opposition, believing somehow this honored the Christ who came to save all. One observes an innate incapacity or refusal by many Christians to live the meaning behind the Beatitudes: that to follow Christ means servant-hood, reconciling our relationships and bearing our sufferings with patience and without any form of retaliation. Christ is an enigma to the Christian.

Christ is an enigma to the Muslim as well who frequently holds a fixed theological understanding of Allah as transcendent and removed from the human condition. It is interesting to note that among The 99 Names for God there seemingly are none which express Allah's humility or vulnerability or surrender. These are qualities of Jesus which are especially predominant at his birth and crucifixion. (Phil 2:6-11), and which we adoringly gaze upon within the Blessed Sacrament. It would appear that this aspect of God's Humility and Self-giving to humanity is the dilemma with which Christ confronts the Muslim.

For a few courageous souls, however, Christ does not remain an enigma. St. Francis, for instance, became so identified with Christ that his body reflected the wounds of Christ's humility and his life bore the fruit of Christ's peace.

## CONCLUSION

It is fitting to end where we began, with St. Francis and with one last observation involving our Franciscan tradition. The story of the Saracens entering the village of Assisi and threatening to invade San Damiano, the home of Clare and

her sisters is familiar.<sup>20</sup> Various images of this event pose St. Clare standing before an imposing, invasive army, and lifting the Blessed Sacrament towards them, possibly in a gesture of blessing. Though this particular image may not be historically accurate,<sup>21</sup> we must admit that something unexplainable happened at that moment. The Saracens experienced some level of awareness which caused them to unanimously retreat, leaving Clare, her sisters, and the city of Assisi unharmed. Is it possible the relationship forged by Francis in his visit to the Middle East, this spiritual and fraternal bond caused the Saracens to retreat without harm to Clare or the city? It is not without significance that Francis, upon his return from Syria<sup>22</sup> immediately added to his Rule of Life an admonition to his friars. He admonished any friar who felt called to go among the Saracens to do so "without any arguments or disputes, but to go subject to them for God's sake" (RNB 16). The instruction is clear, we are to be submissive to all people.<sup>23</sup> What fruits of peace might be realized if we cultivated relationships as Francis did?

The world situation calls us to pursue such relationships. We are being challenged, individually and as a people, to consider ways to move beyond the fixed, mental constructs of God which divide and destroy us, and to enter arenas of relationship and mystery which could potentially unite and heal us. Given our history of violence as a Church and as a people, we can only presume to offer God our willingness to enter these new realms of understanding, and to trust that God will lead us into peaceful communion with one another.

At the outset of this article we asked if it were possible to embrace the basic Islamic tenet of faith if one were truly Catholic. Perhaps now the question has shifted to "How is it possible to do otherwise, if one is truly Catholic?"

<sup>20</sup> Regis Armstrong, ed., *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1993), 165.

<sup>21</sup> Armstrong, *CA:ED*, 277 note a.

<sup>22</sup> Consider the implications that Francis was found by one of his friars in Syria, an area considered significantly Muslim. See A. Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, 435-36; and Albert Houran, *History of the Arab Peoples*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 83-84.

<sup>23</sup> J. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam*, 61-134.

<sup>19</sup> Theologian Beatrice Bruteau uses the term I-I relationship to describe the total communion of Love within the Trinity, Jesus' complete identification in Love with us, and the relationship we in turn are to share with one another. For further discussion see *Radical Optimism*, (Boulder, CO: Sentient Pub., 2002), chapter seven.

**LISTEN, SEEK, OBSERVE, RESIST:  
AT FORT BENNING  
WITH FRANCIS AND BENEDICT**

**MATTHEW FARRINGTON**

The language of religious experience, particularly in both ancient and modern prayer forms, offers a tremendous resource for those involved in dissident political movements. We can extrapolate all sorts of creative and innovative ways to resist tyranny and violence from our search for the sacred. When we stumble through the questions made necessary by religious experience we reach a kind of comforting disbelief, asking ourselves often how the God we seek would allow this creation to break apart, to compartmentalize, sending what is essentially good within it into social obscurity. This is a necessary conflict, suspending what we know, what we are comfortable with, to give room for what scares us most, not being able to recognize what is sacred.

At the annual protest of the School of the Americas this year I found myself clinging to two unlikely companions in prayer. Both Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Benedict of Nursia have a place within any movement that resists injustice. Neither was a stranger to controversy or even abuse. Both were labeled crazy and both were told that their devotion to their path to God would be untenable and prove fruitless. It is in the blissful wake of more than 1500 years of monasticism and 800 years of the Franciscan commitment to the marginalized that we can benefit from the fruit of their folly. But what exactly were they doing with me there, at the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia, while we remembered the dead, talked about peace and demanded the cessation

Matthew Farrington

of murder, rape and torture done in our names and with our money?

Benedict begins his Rule for Monasteries by asking his followers first to "*listen with the ear of your heart*" (RB, Prologue). From there the monk is to seek what is sacred via the journey resulting from that prayerful listening. Francis implored his brothers to "*observe the Gospel*" in challenging and quite radical ways (LR I). Both thought it necessary to resist the confines of violent materialism in order to carve out quiet peace in a brutal world.

Both Saints Francis and Benedict have something to say on violence and the blatant corruption that plagues the nation and the faculty and students of the SOA. When he wrote his Rule, Francis was clear on how brothers should act in the world: they should not "*... quarrel ... but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle, and humble*" (LR III:10-11). This is useful advice for us as well. While it seems natural to associate St. Francis with notions of peace and gentleness, we must remember that this was a radical position for someone in the thirteenth century and remains so today. To commit to a peaceful attitude, indeed a peaceful countenance in a world that desperately needs it, is a difficult proposition.

As I was marching in procession toward the gate at Ft. Benning this quote from Francis's Rule is what I kept returning to. If indeed we are to refashion our world to make room for the instruments of peace and be rid of the instruments of death and abuse, then it begins with this admonishment of Francis for his brothers. Live gently and peacefully whether the world responds or not. Ask God for the courage incumbent upon conviction and for the perseverance necessary during the trials that plague the gentle heart and you will be filled with grace. For Francis it was simple. For us, today, at Ft. Benning the challenge is one of consciousness. We cannot afford the passivity of silence in the face of injustice, no matter how weary we become. Francis expected his brothers to be humble and gentle, even tired and hungry and poor. He did not expect them to be ignorant or dismissive.

St. Benedict, for all his curmudgeonly advice to the monastic movement, leaves an inspired wisdom about facing



down a culture that seems embedded in violence and spiritual aridity. Benedict saw through the trappings of the material world and managed, not unlike Christ, to grab hold of the human heart and speak to the world through his Rule about mercy and justice. Impressive indeed if you remember that he did so from the other side of the cloister wall. In the fourth chapter of his Rule, Benedict offers 73 acts of charity, kindness, faithfulness and humility that are designed to offer the individual a serious path to the sacred and to create a new world in the shell of the old.

The Rule for Monasteries goes further, admonishing that these acts "...are the instruments of the spiritual art" (RB 4) and were to be applied day and night without ceasing. That this was to be done by a monk in a monastery would seem to make it unknowable to the casual observer, but the fruit of this instruction is accessible to us. Monastic men and women have something to say to the rest of us as they study and live by the tenets of an obscure 6<sup>th</sup> century spiritual leader. I suspect what they have to say has a lot to do with prayer and with time and space. This tradition, the absurdity of constant prayer and sacrifice, offers a way to God's heart that is accessible not only to those inside the monastery but for those of us outside, looking for the same kind of kinetic union with what is sacred. And this is precisely the point. Benedict expected his followers to pray without ceasing, to perform charitable works for one another so that the monastery could become a place of refuge and peace for the stranger and a sacred place of profound grace to a troubled world. That this was to be achieved in tandem with vigilant prayer seems even more remarkable.

What then does Benedict offer the School of the Americas, or those of us outside its gates? For one thing, he prays, as do his followers. I am humbled by that act, ridiculous through the eyes of the modern world, that seeks repentance *on behalf of others* and digs through the muck of modern consciousness to reveal that which lies beneath—the seed of a sacred life. Benedict, like Francis, believed not only that human life had intrinsic value beyond what was measurable

on earth, but that life was designed to be in constant union with God.

The School of the Americas is an uncomfortable place. And the men and women who gather at its gate each year in November ask uncomfortable questions there. "What kind of people does this place turn us into?" and "how do we recognize ourselves as people of peace in its terrifying shadow?" are instructive questions if only because we have to live in the tension they create rather than insist on some answer. These questions force us into a spiritual reckoning of sorts, giving us a glimpse of the bleak wreckage created by violent action that goes largely ignored.

Some people will try to find answers to these uncomfortable questions in alarmingly confrontational ways. They will cross a not so imaginary line between civilian and military property and proclaim that going to jail invalidates the imagined necessity of the school, and even of the military establishment. Others will turn to the transcendent. They will pray and they will watch. It is in the company of the former that we can see the product of Francis' call to direct action on behalf of the poor and with the latter that we hold fast to Benedict's injunction to pray without ceasing on behalf of those who cannot.

Francis and Benedict stand out as paragons of spiritual centeredness amidst the chaos of a confusing and sometimes violent world, a world removed from ours only by time. They offer us a spiritual alternative that simultaneously embraces and resists those who would be violent. Benedict insisted that his monks "*Listen readily to holy reading and devote [themselves] often to prayer*" (RB IV) and the monastic tradition has been immersed in prayer, particularly the recitation, singing and chanting of the Psalms. Francis also insisted on daily prayer and his followers now turn to the wisdom of the Psalms in prayer each day, in a fashion that allows significant time for work. What do these actions imply for the rest of us?

One need not pick up a newspaper, or watch a twenty-four-hour news cycle in order to gauge the behavior of fellow world citizens. One need only be immersed in the song and



story of the Psalms to observe with great accuracy the state of world affairs. It was with defined purpose that Benedict and Francis insisted that their followers suspend ministry and work for prayer. Perhaps those of us outside the carefully constructed limits of formal religious institutions would be well served to embrace daily prayer, in some way, in order that we may more readily recognize the sacred within the profane.

When good people break bad laws and when people of all stripes pray for a cessation of violence and the dismantling of institutions that condone and promote it, something pure is at work. To be radicalized in this way is to take on the true meaning of radicalism. That is, to return to the beginning, to that place of original perfection that was supposed to stay with us through our struggle on the mortal coil. But is it possible? Is violence in our bones?

It is from these questions, asked from our point of origin that we can begin to understand the necessity of prayerful action and the language of resistance inspired by religious experience. The School of the Americas exists to train the military personnel of central and south American countries. Some of those trainees have become the most brutal murderers the world has seen since Auschwitz. And it has been in the prayer forms that rely on Jewish scriptures as well as the language of resistance culled from the Gospel that people in the Americas have faced down their murderers.

When the Magnificat, the profoundly beautiful prayer recited by Mary in the Gospel of Luke, was banned from public recitation in El Salvador, people immediately recognized why. The subversive nature of its poetic beauty threatens corrupt power. This prayerful response of a pregnant woman to the greeting of another pregnant woman lends itself well to creative reactions to violence. People could, and did, recite it publicly to resist the actions of an unjust, corrupt and violent leadership.

If Benedict and Francis ensured that from the psalms we would learn that there will be days we can count all our bones and that these will be balanced by days that rivers clap their hands and mountains ring with joy, then Mary's

prayer teaches us that we are capable of turning the world upside down. The poor given their fill and the rich sent empty away; the arrogant cast down while the humble are lifted up, this is a blueprint for resistance and harkens the coming of systemic change that people can lay at the feet of the violent, calling them to a greater purpose.

Framed by religious experience, the language of resistance, whether it be in thought, word or action, offers the world a glimpse into what is most sacred. The God of Abraham, Sarah and Jesus found in that language, is there to offer that same world an opportunity for grace. Grace works best when people resist tyranny and violence in prayer instead of becoming violent themselves. It is then that God will speak most clearly. And it is then that true change can begin to take firm root in soil that has, since Cain, cried out for justice.



**THE SEARCH FOR GOD:  
ASCENT AS A MOTIF  
TOWARD DEEPER CONTEMPLATIVE UNION  
IN BONAVENTURE'S *ITINERARIUM MENTIS IN DEUM***

JOANNA WALLER

In the Prologue to *The Journey of the Mind into God*, Bonaventure's image of Francis's six-winged Seraph illustrates his vision of the journey to God characterized by stages: moving from desire to understanding and, finally, to union with God:

"The figure of the six wings of the Seraph, therefore, is a symbol of six stages of illumination which begin with creatures and lead to God, to whom no one has access properly except through the Crucified."<sup>1</sup>

The elements of this description illuminate Bonaventure's conception of the journey to God. Francis's vision of the Seraph is, for Bonaventure, the way to understanding his own vision of movement from God, to humanity and back to God. This doctrine of emanation and return is adopted and adapted from the writings of neo-Platonists such as Dionysius the Areopagite, quoted throughout *The Journey of the Mind into God*.

*The Journey of the Mind into God* is carefully structured, from the opening Prologue to the closing prayer and Amen. Its six-fold plan develops Bonaventure's spirituality con-

<sup>1</sup> St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, Prol. 3, WSB II, ed. Philotheus Boehner and Zachary Hayes (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002), 37. All other citations will be noted in the text.

cisely and clearly, describing his conception of the beauty of God's plan, ordered for humanity's good, and only asking for a response. The six sections after the Prologue each recount a stage in the progress of the soul, and the final, seventh section is the goal, the ecstatic vision and achievement of peace.

In his opening lines, he uses Scripture and invokes Father, Son, the Virgin Mary, and Francis. He frames the journey in the context of its goal and its form, with the word "peace" repeated as a mantra, the reward for the pilgrim soul. The soul's journey into God is a journey in search for peace. It was this that drove Bonaventure to retreat up the mountain, just as Francis and Jesus had before him (Itin., Pro., 2). He knew that peace would be found in ascending to God and he then has the experience of reliving in contemplation the vision of Francis in ecstasy.

The purgative love of Christ, burning in those who are on the journey, is an essential gateway to knowledge and wisdom of God. For Bonaventure, the journey is not just a spiritual, transformative journey for the soul. It involves seeking and obtaining understanding and knowledge, it has an intellectual aspect as well.

The journey also requires total commitment by the soul. Here, prayer becomes vital. The "cry of prayer" receives the response of the "brightness of contemplation" (Itin., Pro., 3) and enkindles the desire to set out on the journey. The illumination of the soul through this insight is a God-given light, God's response to our prayer. Prayer itself is a painful process, a "groan" (Itin., Pro., 4) and the blood of the suffering Christ will cleanse us from vice. The intellectual exercise leading to understanding alone is insufficient. It needs awe-struck love of God, the expression of wonder, the exercise of humility as a balance to our investigation, knowledge, and understanding.

All these virtues are gifts of God's grace, lavished on the repentant, humble supplicant, who truly seeks to set out on this journey. It is not a journey to be taken in haste, but one requiring a steady pace, so that each stage is absorbed and considered fully before moving on to the next.

## BONAVENTURE'S INFLUENCES

Bonaventure comes from a background of neo-Platonist philosophy, where reality is a hierarchical, dynamic process. Images of concentricity, ladders, stages of growth, all play a part in the attempt to depict the universe, finding a place for all created things, and trying to describe and name the ultimate source of all things. The circular nature of the movement of the soul to God, from emanation from God, the source of all being, to the soul's return to its source, is developed at length by Dionysius. His synthesis of neo-Platonic thought as found in writers such as Plotinus and Proclus, works out a monotheistic, rather than pantheistic doctrine.

Bonaventure coalesces and reworks elements from diverse traditions, combining them in his own "intensely personal and unified vision of reality." *The Journey of the Mind into God* is a very concise, rich account of this vision. Poverty and simplicity of soul are prerequisites for beginning the journey. "Only one who is small enough to recognise his need for Another can embark upon this spiritual journey." Although *The Journey of the Mind into God* combines speculative theology and philosophy, it is essentially a spiritual and very personal text. As with its predecessors, it is part of a human struggle to express the inexpressible. Plotinus uses a wealth of images to try to express his vision of the Absolute, mainly drawn from nature, trees, rivers, mountains (e.g. *Enneads* III.8). Bonaventure in turn uses similar images of hierarchy and order to picture the Christ-centred universe.

Bonaventure's style is very ordered. He uses significant numbers, threes, sixes, sevens to organise his thoughts, and add greater emphasis and significance. The way in which ideas contained in the text fall into place in these patterns endows them with greater importance by virtue of their being amenable to such patterns. Similarly, constant scriptural references, and those to the Fathers of the Church and to Francis firmly root the speculative, abstract nature of the text. It may deal with matters of which human beings have

only a slight grasp, but nonetheless it is not purely theoretical, it has firm and indisputable origins.

## RETURNING TO THE TEXT

The first chapter describes the separate stages of the ascent. First comes the contemplation of God as he is seen in the universe. The goal is the highest good, but it is this power itself which provides the impetus to begin the journey, and gives the weak human soul the strength (*Itin.* 1:1). It starts with prayer, the humble request for grace and strength, "Prayer ... is the mother and origin of the upward movement of the soul" (*Itin.* 1:1). Bonaventure uses the neo-Platonic term, First Principle, for God, and sees the final aim as contemplating/gazing on the First Principle. The three-fold movement towards God is outward to the cosmos, inward to our own soul and upward towards the goal. This triadic structure is essential. We have to look around at where we are, look in at who we are, then upward to where we are going. The triads are piled on each other, images of the three-day journey into the wilderness in Exodus, three divisions in the day, morning-noon-night, the threefold substance of Christ, body, spirit and divinity (*Itin.* 1:3-4). The three stages can be doubled, "depending on whether we consider God as the *alpha* and the *omega*, or ... as through a mirror or as in a mirror.... Or ... as related to another ... or simply in itself in its purity" (*Itin.* 1:5).

Bonaventure then describes the effects of sin on this entire beautiful pattern. Sin distorts the picture. He describes the sinful person as being "blind and bent over" (*Itin.* 1:7). Through Jesus Christ, grace and wisdom come to the rescue, lifting up the lost so that they can begin the ascent to God. Once sin has been avoided, the body straightens up, and can begin to live a holy life and attend to the truth (*Itin.* 1:8).

Scriptural images, such as the mirror and the ladder, were all very familiar to Bonaventure's readers (*Itin.* 1:9). He also provides a taxonomy of creation, putting "things in terms of



their creation and in terms of their distinction and adornment" (*Itin.* 1:14) in the order in which they help as a way to find God. Contemplation, faith and reason are tools for developing wisdom and understanding, to start out on the road towards the ultimate reality of God "Therefore, from visible realities, the soul rises to the consideration of the power, wisdom and goodness of God in as far as God is existing, living, and intelligent, purely spiritual, incorruptible and immutable" (*Itin.* 1:13).

A new pattern of seven emerges in the properties of created things, witnessing to the glory of God in his power, wisdom and goodness. The individual who still remains unmoved or ignorant of God must be blind, deaf, dumb and a fool. The whole of creation will revolt against such a person (*Itin.* 1:15).

The next two chapters continue the same theme, God made manifest in the wonders of creation. In Chapter 2, we perceive this through our five senses, observing the inner landscape, contemplating God as he is seen in things, as well as through the signs of his presence in the world. Our perception of objects, obtained through our senses, then leads to pleasure in the beauty of things.

For Bonaventure beauty is inherent in an Augustinian universe of order, symmetry and harmony, "the senses are pained by extremes but take delight in moderation" (*Itin.* 2:5). Our pleasure in any particular thing lies in its harmony (*Itin.* 2:6). The whole world is therefore available to us through our senses, through which we see signs of God everywhere (*Itin.* 2:7). The beauty, order and harmony reflect the beauty of God. Since he is the generating Source of all, then everything must also reflect what he is (*Itin.* 2:8).

Returning to Augustine, Bonaventure expounds his theory of numbers, concluding that, "all things are beautiful and in some way delightful; and since there is no beauty or delight without proportion; and since proportion resides first of all in numbers; it is necessary that all things involve number" (*Itin.* 2:10). Hence Bonaventure's use of number to develop his spirituality – it provides a firm basis, and leads to the highest Principle, the source of all number.

A recurring theme, Bonaventure expresses his incomprehension and criticism of those who will not see, despite every opportunity. With all this beauty, order and harmony around, all the gifts of sense and perception, the intellect and wisdom, they are yet oblivious to the presence of God (*Itin.* 2:13).

In chapter 3 we enter into ourselves, to discover God in the sanctuary of the temple. Bonaventure elaborates this image of the journey as being the movement through the temple: from the outer court – the created world – to the inner sanctuary – ourselves – and into the Holy of Holies where God himself is found. This is where the intellect takes over and we grasp the meaning of "terms, propositions and inferences" (*Itin.* 3:3). We have to know the properties of being, as one, true and good: as perfect/imperfect, complete/incomplete, and so on. Knowledge of truth leads to understanding and we are taught the truth by what is Truth itself. So as long as we are seeing clearly, unobstructed by desires and senses, then we can see Truth through ourselves (*Itin.* 3:3). Bonaventure constantly draws out the way in which all these quests – for beauty, harmony, truth, understanding – lead to the same end, God himself. The sciences, that is natural, rational and moral philosophy, also point this way, no matter what is being studied (*Itin.* 3:6). The illumination provided by science is "like lights and beams coming down from that eternal law into our mind" (*Itin.* 3:7). Once again those who do not believe are termed foolish, the term echoing Psalm 75.

As we move on through the stages of illumination, and begin to be aware of God, in creation and within ourselves, we are in Chapter Four, now seeing God through the light of grace. Bonaventure recalls the traditional three stages of enlightenment: purgation, illumination and perfection, as well as the reasons why so many fail to pass this way. Cares and concerns, desires of the flesh, can fill our minds and obstruct our vision, so we cannot truly enter into ourselves and see that the First Principle is within us (*Itin.* 4:1).

He returns to the saving action of Christ, in a simple image of the fallen soul given a helping hand to rise. Even the

most enlightened cannot move further on the journey without the mediation of Christ. Only through faith, hope and love in Christ can we "re-enter into the enjoyment of truth as into a paradise" (*Itin.* 4:2). The theological virtues allow us to recover enjoyment of our senses and truly come to know, love and serve God.

Bonaventure uses the Song of Songs – which he says was composed especially for the use of those in this fourth stage – to illustrate further the state of the soul as it begins to learn to delight in itself and its own beauty and to praise God as it prepares for spiritual ecstasy (*Itin.* 4:3). At this stage, the hierarchical nature of the spirit becomes clear. Bonaventure clearly reflects Dionysius' hierarchy of the heavens in his account of the angelic choirs and Jesus as the "supreme Hierarchy" (*Itin.* 4:4-5). The purpose of the division of creation is ordered only to the achievement of perfection by all its components, as Dionysius says: "The goal of a hierarchy then is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God, and to be at one with him." For Bonaventure, Scripture is the tool at this stage, teaching us through the law of Moses, the prophets and the gospel. Christ's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit leads us upward, while we are still grounded in faith, but exalted by hope and led into love of God (*Itin.* 4:8).

There are two ways of contemplating God in himself. Bonaventure returns to the image of the temple, moving from the outer court, to the inner sanctuary and into the Holy of Holies. Here we consider God in his attributes as one God, and in the attributes of the Persons of God. God is Being, the YHWH of Moses, and God is Good, in the Trinity, the plurality of love in relationship. He uses the image of blindness again for those who do not grasp the unity of God's being. Just as an eye sees only the things illuminated, and ignores the light itself, so the soul in darkness looks elsewhere for God and does not realize that the darkness itself is where God most illuminates our mind (*Itin.* 5:4). The ultimate being cannot have a source, and therefore must be the primary being "the eternal, the most simple, the most actual, the most perfect and the supremely one" (*Itin.* 5:5).

Understanding this is enough to be "filled to some extent with the illumination of the eternal light" (*Itin.* 5:6). Knowing this being is the alpha and omega also gives the soul knowledge of the existence of God and therefore of his utter supremacy in all things, God all-in-all. The second way of contemplating God at this stage is in the Trinity, whose name is Good. Here, Bonaventure uses Anselm's proof based on the goodness of God "that than which nothing better can be thought," (*Itin.* 6:2), more as argument than proof for God's perfect goodness. The trinitarian nature is essential because the highest good must be self-diffusive, with a beloved and a co-beloved, "one generated and one spirated" (*Itin.* 6:2). No matter the esoteric nature of these things, the act of lifting up our eyes to contemplate them allows us to comprehend them in their fullness. Bonaventure's clear account shows his own grasp of this truth (*Itin.* 6:3). This is the purpose and essence of eternal life, as Jesus says "to know the only true God, and the one whom you have sent, Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3)" (*Itin.* 6:4). This is where human beings achieve perfect illumination, as they see "humanity made in the image of God" as on the sixth day of creation (*Itin.* 6:7). All that remains now is to rest.

As Bonaventure reaches his final chapter, he recalls the six stages traversed, with further six-fold images. Throughout the journey, Christ has been focus and mediator for the pilgrim striving for perfection. He comes back to his guides, Moses, Francis, Jesus, showing how they achieved this level of ecstasy, true union with God. Ultimately, all the intellectual activity needed to arrive at this point is now abandoned, "and our deepest and total affection must be directed to God and transformed into God" (*Itin.* 7:4). It is all gift of the Holy Spirit now. Inquiry, talking and writing is over, as we are invited "to pass over and transcend not only the sensible world but the soul itself ... and [to celebrate] the Passover, with Christ ... yet experiencing, in as far as possible in this pilgrim state, ... *This day you will be with me in Paradise*" (*Itin.* 7:1-2). The Trinity, in Dionysius' prayer, will direct us to this knowledge of the mysteries. And as we enter the peace that

we have been searching for, we can answer in the affirmative the question "Do you love me?", and love for eternity.

Bonaventure's search is an informed one. He sets out his tools, philosophy and scripture, the love of Christ to drive us on, and his clearly-drawn map. There is no excuse for the stubborn folly of those blind to this truth. The ultimate goal is certain. Finally, all we need is the will to undertake the journey, because through Christ the mediator, we cannot make a false step, and we will achieve union. This brief treatise is full of Bonaventure's own overflowing love and conviction of being loved, and when he concludes, with the embrace of death, he can truly say that his journey into God has ended successfully.



## BOOK REVIEW

Dardess, George. *Do We Worship the Same God? Comparing the Bible and the Quran*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony's Messenger Press, 2006

It has been said that we come to fear what we do not understand. In his book, *Do We Worship the Same God?* George Dardess, deacon of Blessed Sacrament Church in Rochester, NY and long time student and lecturer of Islam, offers the Catholic Christian an invitation to move beyond misunderstanding and fear and to reckon a truthful encounter with this perplexing and increasingly significant Abrahamic tradition. The underlying hope of the book is to foster meaningful human relationships between Christian and Muslim.

Beginning with his introduction Dardess offers his readers wise instruction in cultivating these relationships. We must first, he suggests, familiarize ourselves with Muslim Scripture. What does their Sacred Quran "actually say about God and God's deeds among us?" One does not frequently hear such a challenging and straightforward admonition within Catholic circles to familiarize oneself with the Quran. But as Dardess explains, this would of necessity be an essential work in determining whether or not we do indeed worship the same God. Secondly, Dardess advises us to "enter meaningful dialogue," and to do that in the context of establishing human relationship with our Muslim neighbors, i.e. "knowing each other's names, learning about each other's families, about each other's aches and pains, about each other's fears and hopes." The book, divided into two parts, guides the reader in these pursuits.



A rewarding but challenging book, part one consists of two chapters and provides a basic orientation to Muhammad, Islam's revered Prophet, and to the Quran, its sacred Scripture. Part two, consisting of 16 chapters, offers a comparative examination of major theological topics from both a Biblical and Quranic viewpoint. Creation, Adam and Eve, Satan, the Final Judgment, as well as the more controversial subjects of the Annunciation, the Incarnation and Crucifixion. Each chapter ends with thought provoking questions meant to enhance one's personal or group-related study

Dardess is unafraid to address the real difficulties which ultimately present themselves when one attempts such a comparative theological study or enters meaningful dialogue between the two traditions. Just as the reader may enjoy a sense of transcending a most difficult issue, Dardess presents the next theological dilemma. His questions challenge us to do what most of us have great difficulty in doing – living with paradox, without all the definitive answers, and reverencing what may seem foreign to our own experience or belief system. One example of how this method is expressed in the book regards the uneasiness between Muslim and Christian in our differing view of the Person of Jesus. In several passages the Quran confronts the Christian faith with a seemingly clear renunciation of Jesus' Divinity. In response, Dardess reminds the reader of the long-standing contentions which existed within the Christian arena regarding the very topic of Christ's humanity and Divinity. By the second century, substantial divisions had been created as the various factions within the Church took their polemic stances and claimed their conclusions to be the final authority on the matter. It is suggested that these related Quranic passages may in part be meant more as a reprimand to the many divisions among Christians which were evident at the time of Muhammad, than they are a clear theological statement against Christ's Divinity. Throughout the book the reader is invited to see beyond and beneath the more common conclusions, to reflect on other possible implications, and to consider the sacredness of the Muslim experience while clarifying and deepening one's own Christian faith. If one approaches this material

with a real desire to understand and a real love of the subject matter great benefit and insight may be gained.

The answer to the question, "Do we worship the same God?" may for some be long in coming, acknowledges Dardess. If in the end, however, we are able to answer "yes," the blessing will be given not only to better befriend one another, but perhaps to find ways to pray with one another to the common Creator we worship. Some readers may be disappointed by the lack of a substantial follow-up bibliography. But perhaps the only bibliography the Holy Spirit may require of us is a continued prayerful approach to the Bible and the Quran and a genuine desire to befriend our Muslim neighbors. *Do We Worship the Same God?* provides a well-grounded core experience in this pursuit.

Sr. Clare Julian Carbone, O.S.C.  
Chesterfield Monastery  
January, 2008

## BOOK REVIEW

Saint Sing, Susan. *Francis and the San Damiano Cross: Meditations on Spiritual Transformation*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006.

The essence of Susan Saint Sing's Book: *Francis and the San Damiano Cross: Meditations on Spiritual Transformation* is captured in its dedication to the people of New Orleans after Katrina. In the spirit of Francis and Clare the book offers that transformation of hope to the buona gente, good people loved by God. As the reader meditates upon Saint Sing's descriptions of the San Damiano Cross one can visualize oneself there with Francis and Clare as they pondered, "Go rebuild my house." How does that apply to today and a "house that needs to be rebuilt?"

This book is meant for those both familiar with or new to the Franciscan Charism who want to deepen their personal spiritual journey. Reflecting on Francis's experience at the foot of the San Damiano Cross leads to a more profound understanding of our personal journey, as well as that of society as a whole. Susan Saint Sing shares her personal experiences of how the San Damiano Cross spoke, and continues to speak, to her daily. Each chapter provides a scholarly as well as personal reflection on a particular image on the San Damiano Cross.

Susan Saint Sing's interest in meditation or, in Clare's words, to "gaze upon" the San Damiano Cross developed during the years Saint Sing lived in Assisi. Recuperating from a serious life-threatening athletic injury, Saint Sing allows the reader an intimate insight into her personal spiritual trans-

formation, experienced in those hours before the cross. Saint Sing, a Secular Franciscan, gives the reader a glimpse into what centuries of pilgrims experienced when they considered this spiritual icon.

Each chapter presents a sequential reflection on the Cross, Francis's response, and a personal response. In this format, Saint Sing explains how the scriptural figures represented on the Cross become Francis's spiritual family, replacing his estranged biological family. This insight gives the reader a new perspective into the significance of the Cross for Francis. To go to the Cross in prayer was going to his spiritual family for guidance.

As Saint Sing leads the reader to a personal response, she asks first to consider, "go rebuild my house." The "house" or spirit within each of us may be in darkness and in need of light and life. The anger, hurt, denial or disappointments that we have not "let go" of in our own spiritual journeys is what we are asked to bring before the Cross. Can we, as Francis did, seek to be enlightened, to look at ourselves and then the world around us with new lenses? Do we "desire" to seek that inner peace and can we "gaze upon" the Cross for the answers needed in our lives? Can we then ponder the needs of the people in our lives and the needs around the world?

The chapters of the book flow into each other leading to Saint Sing's challenge, in the last section, to be open to let the Cross speak to us today. The last section, Another Vision, Another Version challenges us to be open to "the other," different cultures, different people. Symbolized by the Navajo "Tohatchi Cross," the enculturation of the Franciscan Charism on one particular group of Native Americans leads us not only to look back at the historical injustices but to look to the future to "go rebuild my house" for the inclusion of all peoples in the spirit of Francis and Clare.

Paula J. Scraba, Ph.D.  
St. Bonaventure University, NY

## ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

**FRANCES BISCOGLIO**, is a first-time contributor to *The Cord*. Professor Biscoglio teaches English Literature at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, New York.

**CLARE JULIAN CARBONE, O.S.C.** is a Poor Clare of the Chesterfield Monastery in New Jersey. Sister Clare Julian has shared her insights on Franciscan/Islamic relations and written a book review in this issue.

**MATTHEW FARRINGTON** is a first-time contributor to *THE CORD* and writes to share his experience at the annual demonstration at the SOA.

**ROBERT J. KARRIS, O.F.M.** is a member of the Research Faculty at The Franciscan Institute and a member of the publications team, serving as General Editor of the Bonaventure Texts-in-Translation Series, in addition to his work as a scripture scholar and preacher.

**SEAMUS MULHOLLAND, O.F.M.** is a frequent contributor to *The Cord* and serves on the teaching staff of the Franciscan International Study Centre in Canterbury, England.

**LANCE B. RICHEY** is associate professor of Religious Studies at Cardinal Stritch University where he teaches courses on the Old and New Testaments, philosophy, and systematic theology. In his spare time he researches and writes on Franciscan topics.

**PAULA J. SCRABA, Ph.D.** is an associate professor of Physical Education at St. Bonaventure University as well as a graduate of the School of Franciscan Studies at The Franciscan Institute. Besides her teaching duties, Dr. Scraba actively promotes integrating Franciscan values into all areas of life.

**JOANNA WALLER** is another first-time contributor to *The Cord* although she is not new to the Franciscan Institute, currently working on the translation from French to English of a book on Colette of Corbie to be published by Franciscan Institute Publications. Joanna lives in Kent in the United Kingdom.



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Washington Theological Union  
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## Franciscan Life Center

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Friday, August 1 – Thursday, August 7  
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For more information, or to register, contact:

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**Time:** February 2 to March 13, May 3 to June 12 & November 1 to December 11.

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**Time:** June 11 at 7:00 PM to June 17 at 10:00 AM with brunch.

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A team for Franciscan Retreat Directors will provide spiritual direction, prayer and ritual, centering around companioning individuals in transformational processes. The backdrop and emphasis will be in an atmosphere of silence, contemplation and prayer.

**Time:** July 23 from 7:00 PM to July 29 10:30 AM with brunch

**Fee:** \$420

For more information contact: Mary Ann Hamilton at the Portiuncula Center for Prayer

9263 West St. Francis Road, Frankfort, IL 60423

Phone: 815-464-3880

Email: [info@portforprayer.org](mailto:info@portforprayer.org)

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Presentation of

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### Program Schedule

#### Friday, April 18

Registration

Social Gathering of the Sisters and Brothers

#### Saturday, April 19

Welcome and Opening Ritual

**Keynote Address**  
Roland Faley, TOR

**Breakout Sessions**  
Margaret Carney, OSF  
Jean François Godel-Calogeras  
Thomas Barton, OSF  
Ann Bremmer, OSF

For further information contact  
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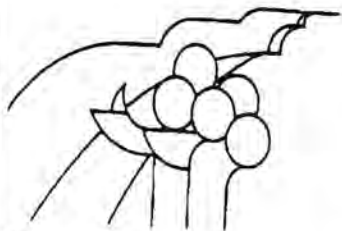


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See ad p. 91

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See ad p. 88

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Washington, D.C.

See ad p. 86

## Abbreviations

### Writings of Saint Francis

Adm	The Admonitions
BIL	A Blessing for Brother Leo
Ctc	The Canticle of the Creatures
CtExh	The Canticle of Exhortation
1Frg	Fragments of Worchester Manuscript
2Frg	Fragments of Thomas of Celano
3Frg	Fragments of Hugh of Digne
LtAnt	A Letter to Br. Anthony of Padua
1LtCl	First Letter to the Clergy (Earlier Edition)
2LtCl	Second Letter to the Clergy (Later Edition)
1LtCus	The First Letter to the Custodians
2LtCus	The Second Letter to the Custodians
1LtF	The First Letter to the Faithful
2LtF	The Second Letter to the Faithful
LtL	A Letter to Brother Leo
LtMin	A Letter to a Minister
LtOrd	A Letter to the Entire Order
LtR	A Letter to the Rulers of the People
ExhP	Exhortation of the Praise of God
PrOF	A Prayer Inspired by the Our Father
PrsG	The Praises of God
Off	The Office of the Passion
PrCr	The Prayer before the Crucifix
ER	The Earlier Rule ( <i>Regula non bullata</i> )
LR	The Later Rule ( <i>Regula bullata</i> )
RH	A Rule for Hermitages
SalBVM	A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
SalV	A Salutation of Virtues
Test	The Testament
TPJ	True and Perfect Joy

### Writings of Saint Clare

1Lag	First Letter to Agnes of Prague
2Lag	Second Letter to Agnes of Prague
3Lag	Third Letter to Agnes of Prague
4Lag	Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague
LEr	Letter to Ermentrude of Bruges
RCI	Rule of Clare
TestCl	Testament of Clare
BCI	Blessing of Clare

### Franciscan Sources

1C	The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano
2C	The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul
3C	The Treatise on the Miracles by Thomas of Celano
LCh	The Legend for Use in the Choir
Off	The Divine Office of St. Francis by Julian of Speyer
LJS	The Life of St. Francis by Julian of Speyer
VL	The Versified Life of St. Francis by Henri d'Avanches
1-3JT	The Praises by Jacapone da Todi
DCom	The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri
TL	Tree of Life by Ubertino da Casale
1MP	The Mirror of Perfection, Smaller Version
2MP	The Mirror of Perfection, Larger Version
HTrb	The History of the Seven Tribulations by Angelo of Clareno
ScEx	The Sacred Exchange between St. Francis and Lady Poverty
AP	The Anonymous of Perugia
L3C	The Legend of the Three Companions
AC	The Assisi Compilation
1-4Snn	The Sermons of Bonaventure
LMj	The Major Legend by Bonaventure
LMn	The Minor Legend by Bonaventure
BPr	The Book of Praises by Bernard of Besse
ABF	The Deeds of St. Francis and His Companions
LEI	The Little Flowers of Saint Francis
KnSF	The Knowing of Saint Francis
ChrTE	The Chronicle of Thomas of Eceleston
ChrJG	The Chronicle of Jordan of Giano