FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY

God is Good – God is Humble

God is good. God is humble. This is the beginning for Franciscan theology. Saint Francis entered into the mystery of God and found these two attributes. In humility God bends over to embrace the world in love, accepting us right where we are, dwelling in the brokenness of our own lives. God is good, supreme good, totally good.

While Francis desired to imitate Jesus as far as humanly possible [often called being Christo-centric or centered on Christ], Francis viewed Jesus as the only true way to approach the Father. It is this ultimate relationship with the Father that compels and attracts Francis, to be loved by the Father as deeply as the Father loves the Son.

Where Francis begins to differ from other saints/founders, is in his approach to Jesus. Where most seek to emulate one or more aspects of Jesus’ life, Francis becomes totally immersed in the reality of “all” of Jesus. Ultimately, the spiritual goal of a Franciscan is to struggle to become a total imitator of Jesus, to become “alter Christus” (another Christ) touching all of God’s creation as Jesus did. This is no small goal or challenge, but a path that will ask you to look deeply into how you set your life’s priorities, and how you live them out day to day.

~ Bob Fitzsimmons, OFS, “St. Francis and His Approach to Divinity” (FUN Manual)

“The journey of prayer for Franciscans is the discovery of God at the center of our lives. We pray not to acquire a relationship with God as if acquiring something that did not previously exist. Rather, we pray to disclose the image of God in which we are created, the God within us, that is, the one in whom we are created and in whom lies the seed of our identity. We pray so as to discover what we already have – “the incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and of the human heart.” We pray not to “ascend” to God but to “give birth to God,” to allow the image in which we are created to become visible. We pray to bear Christ anew. In prayer, therefore, we discover what we already have, the potential for the fullness of life, and this life is the life of Christ.” Source: Franciscan Prayer by Ilia Delio, OSF

THE CRIB

Under the guidance of divine providence, it happened that Joseph, the Virgin’s husband, took to the town of Bethlehem the young girl of royal descent who was pregnant. When nine months had passed since his conception, the King of Peace like a bridegroom from his bridal chamber
(Psalm 19:5), came forth from the virginal womb. He was brought forth into the light without any corruption just as he was conceived without any stain or lust. Although he was great and rich, he became small and poor for us. He chose to be born away from a home in a stable, to be wrapped in swaddling clothes, to be nourished by virginal milk and to lie in a manger between an ox and an ass. Then “there shone upon us a day of new redemption, restoration of the past and eternal happiness. Then throughout the whole world the heavens became honey-sweet.”

Now, then, my soul,
embrace that divine manger;
press your lips upon and kiss the boy’s feet.
Then in your mind
keep the shepherd’s watch,
marvel at the assembling host of angels,
join in the heavenly melody,
singing with your voice and heart:
Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace to men of good will.

(Source – The Tree of Life by Bonaventure)

INCARNATION

God comes down (Path of Descent)

God bends down to embrace us in Love,
to lift up our nature and all of creation
to invite us into the Dance of the Trinity.

If God bends down in love for us through the
Word incarnate, then we who are “little words”
must bend down in love for one another and
for all creation if the universe is to find its
fullness in Christ.

THE CROSS

Prayer of Saint Francis Before the San Damiano Cross

Almighty God, and You my Lord Jesus Christ,
I pray you to enlighten me and to dispel the darkness of my spirit;
give me a faith that is without limit,
a hope that is ever unfailing,
and a love that is universal.
Grant, O my God, that I may really know You
and that I may be guided in all things
according to Your light and in conformity with Your will.
(St. Francis of Assisi)

From the Legend of the Three Companions

From that hour (before the cross at San Damiano) his heart was stricken and wounded with melting love and compassion for the passion of Christ; and for the rest of his life he carried in it the wounds of the Lord Jesus. This was clearly proved later when the stigmata of those same wounds were miraculously impressed upon his own holy body for all to see.

From the Testament of Saint Francis

And God inspired me with such faith in his churches that I used to pray with all simplicity, saying, “We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, here and in all your churches in the whole world, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”

From the Legend of the Three Companions

One day, just a few years after his conversion, he was following the road that passes near St. Mary of the Portiuncula and, as he was walking by himself, he was lamenting and weeping out loud. A spiritual man, whom we know well and who reported it to us, met him at that time. This man had been very kind to the saint and had consoled him before he even had one brother and continued to do so. He said to him, "What is the matter, brother?" He thought that he was suffering from some infirmity. Blessed Francis answered: "I ought to travel through the whole world, crying and moaning without any false shame over the passion of my Lord!" The man began to cry with him and wept bitterly.

The Sacred Stigmata of Saint Francis of Assisi

Feast: September 17

Early in August, 1224, Francis retired with three companions to “that rugged rock ’twixt Tiber and Arno”, as Dante called La Verna, there to keep a forty days fast in preparation for Michaelmas. During this retreat the sufferings of Christ became more than ever the burden of his meditations; into few souls, perhaps, had the full meaning of the Passion so deeply entered. It was on or about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September) while praying on the mountainside, that he beheld the marvellous vision of the seraph, as a sequel of which there appeared on his body the visible marks of the five wounds of the Crucified which, says an early writer, had long since been impressed upon his heart. Brother Leo, who was with St. Francis when he received the stigmata, has left us in his note to the saint’s autograph blessing, preserved at Assisi, a clear and simple account of the miracle, which for the rest is better attested than many another historical fact. The saint’s right side is described as bearing on open wound which looked as if made by a lance, while through his hands and feet were black nails of flesh, the points of which were bent backward. After the reception of the stigmata, Francis suffered increasing pains throughout his frail body, already broken by continual mortification. For, condescending as the saint always was to the weaknesses of others, he was ever so unsparing
towards himself that at the last he felt constrained to ask pardon of “Brother Ass”, as he called his body, for having treated it so harshly. Worn out, moreover, as Francis now was by eighteen years of unremitting toil, his strength gave way completely, and at times his eyesight so far failed him that he was almost wholly blind.

(Taken from Catholic Encyclopedia; see also the account given in The Minor Legend of Saint Francis by Bonaventure.)

THE CUP

From Major Life of St. Francis by St. Bonaventure

The memory of Christ Jesus crucified was ever present in the depths of his [Francis’] heart like a bundle of myrrh, and he longed to be wholly transformed into him by the fire of love. In his extraordinary devotion to Christ, he fasted every year for forty days, beginning at the Epiphany, the time when Christ himself lived in the desert. Then he would go to some lonely place and remain there shut up in his cell, taking as little food and drink as possible, as he spent all his time praying and praising God. He loved Christ so fervently and Christ returned his love so intimately that he seemed to have his Savior before his eyes continually, as he once privately admitted to his companions. He burned with love for the Sacrament of our Lord’s Body with all his heart, and was lost in wonder at the thought of such condescending love, such loving condescension. He received Holy Communion often and so devoutly that he roused others to devotion too. The presence of the Immaculate Lamb used to take him out of himself, so that he was often lost in ecstasy.”

From the Admonitions of St. Francis

“. . . Every day he humbles himself just as he did when he came from his heavenly throne (Wis. 18:15) into the Virgin’s womb; every day he comes to us and lets us see him in abjection, when he descends from the bosom of the Father into the hands of the priest at the altar. He shows himself to us in this sacred bread just as he once appeared to his apostles in real flesh. With their own eyes they saw only his flesh, but they believed that he was God, because they contemplated him with the eyes of the spirit. We, too, with our own eyes, see only bread and wine, but we must see further and firmly believe that this is his most holy Body and Blood, living and true. In this way our Lord remains continually with his followers, as he promised, Behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world (Mt. 28:20).”

From A Letter to the Entire Order by Saint Francis

Let everyone be struck with fear,
let the whole world tremble,
and let the heavens exult
when Christ, the Son of the living God,
is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!
O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!
O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe,
God and the Son of God,
so humbles Himself
that for our salvation
He hides Himself
under an ordinary piece of bread!
Brothers, look at the humility of God,
and \textit{pour out your hearts before Him}!

Humble yourselves
that you may be exalted by Him!

Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
that He Who gives Himself totally to you
may receive you totally!

\section*{CREATION}

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing. To you, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy those who endure in peace, for by you, Most High, they will be crowned.
Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whose embrace no living person can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Happy those she finds doing your most holy will. The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve him with great humility.

“The Canticle” is “the expression that takes place in the night of the soul.” (Eloi Leclerc, OFM). When St. Francis wrote “The Canticle,” he had returned from Mt. Alverna where he had received the wounds of Christ in September the previous year. He probably has tuberculosis and is suffering throughout his body. It is around April 1225. He is slowly dying and will die in another 18 months. He has a disease that causes his eyes to bleed and makes light unbearable. He lives for over fifty days and nights in a darkened hut with field mice running back and forth across his weakened body. He hemorrhages from the wounds of the stigmata. He is in a deep depression over the departure from his ideals by the brothers. He feels abandoned by God and cut off from God’s love by his own sins. Out of the terrible darkness, his poem is composed, and he begins to sing, “Most High, all-powerful, good Lord./Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing./To you alone, Most High, do they belong,/and no man is worthy to mention Your name.”

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Francis sought occasion to love God in everything.  
He delighted in all the works of God’s hands 
and from the vision of joy on earth 
his mind soared aloft to the life-giving source and cause of all. 
In everything beautiful, he saw him who is beauty itself, and he followed his Beloved everywhere by his likeness imprinted on creation; of all creation he made a ladder by which he might mount up and embrace Him who is all-desirable.  
By the power of his extraordinary faith he tasted the Goodness which is the source of all in each and every created thing, as in so many rivulets. 
He seemed to perceive a divine harmony in the interplay of powers and faculties given by God to his creatures and like the prophet David he exhorted them all to praise God. 
(from Bonaventure, Major Life, Chapter IX

LADY POVERTY

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:3.

For Francis, Lady Poverty was symbolic of the poor Christ. She was the symbol of the paradoxes of the Gospel, such as richness in poverty, life in death, strength in weakness, peace in
temptation, fullness in emptiness and love in detachment and deprivation. Lady Poverty made everything hard soft, and everything difficult easy.

For Francis, Lady Poverty also was a means to the indwelling of God and a way of life that makes present the kingdom of God here and now. (“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”) God takes up his dwelling among us only when we are poor in spirit, emptied and detached from all that prevents Him from filling us with himself. Lady Poverty involves simple living, an attitude of love, thankfulness and giving and using our gifts as they were intended. It brings freedom and true joy and, above all, requires humility. It involves cleaning out the clutter of our hearts and surroundings to make room for God and surrendering to His holy will.

The way to Lady Poverty takes us through the Garden of Eden where we must slay the dragons of pride, pleasure and possessions, those same dragons encountered by our first parents and by Jesus in the desert and again in the other garden, the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the struggle that Francis went through, especially during his early days. There, in Eden or the desert or Gethsemane, like Francis, we learn that Christ alone is the fullness of life and our priority is to seek first the kingdom of God. We repent and choose to follow the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. We join Jesus on the cross and die to self.

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Matthew 16:24.

The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, Article 11

Trusting in the Father, Christ chose for himself and his mother a poor and humble life, even though he valued created things attentively and lovingly. Let the Secular Franciscans seek a proper spirit of detachment from temporal goods by simplifying their own material needs. Let them be mindful that according to the gospel they are stewards of the goods received for the benefit of God’s children.

Thus, in the spirit of “the Beatitudes,” and as pilgrims and strangers on their way to the home of the Father, they should strive to purify their hearts from every tendency and yearning for possession and power.