The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition

A Working Draft Document

William Short OFM and Ilia Delio OSF

Introduction

Over the past thirty years members of the world-wide Franciscan Family have focused their efforts on understanding the “spirit of the founder,” and discovering ways to bring the “charism” of Francis and Clare into the foreground of the renewal of Franciscan life. These efforts have borne fruit in a greater appreciation of the distinctive character of our shared “evangelical life,” as brothers and sisters of the three Orders.

As we look at ourselves at the beginning of the new millennium in this Jubilee Year we recognize that in the English-speaking world our numbers are smaller and our average age higher than they were at the time of Vatican II. We have withdrawn from many institutions, including centers of higher education and scholarship. Yet even in these circumstances we have a responsibility — toward those who came before us, toward those who are around us today, and toward those who will come after us. That responsibility is one of passing on what we ourselves have received: the Franciscan tradition itself.

This tradition includes more than the “founding charism” expressed in the words and example of Francis and Clare, that is, life according to the form of the Holy Gospel. The tradition has continued to live and develop in the generations following Francis and Clare. Their (our) brothers and sisters in every branch of the Family have made important contributions to the world of culture, science, art, philosophy, spirituality, theology, mysticism, and literature. This is our inheritance, passed on to us thanks to the efforts of earlier generations of copyists and teachers, printers and popularizers. Ours is now the responsibility to assure that this “patrimony of the poor,” our Franciscan ancestors, survives and thrives in the coming generation.

We must be honest with ourselves about this task. With the many pressing needs in our fraternities and communities today, the many legitimate demands of Church and society, the task of passing on this tradition may seem to some a matter of low priority. It may even seem irrelevant to the more urgent business of everyday ministry and community needs. And so it would be, if this were merely an exercise in museum-keeping, carefully labeling and dusting antique artifacts of a past long-dead.

But this is not the case. Our Franciscan tradition has a “word” to speak today, one that responds to deeply-felt needs in our Church and our world. Our tradition can help to articulate a viable way of being Christian in the world today: as brothers and sisters, in harmony with the natural environment, in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed, in reduced consumption of the earth’s resources. And for all these concerns we can offer a “word” from an ancient and eloquent tradition, giving an account of the hope that is in us.

But that word will be lost, and that alternative vision will disappear if we do not take steps in these critical years at the threshold of the millennium to retrieve, preserve, and articulate that tradition in a language that is understandable to the men and women of our day. Who else if not us? When else if not now?

Identifying the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition

I. View of God

Francis: — emphasis on divine goodness — Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Bonaventure: — Trinity — Word as Center — Metaphysics of the good [love] — God as self-diffusive goodness [humility, poverty of God]

Scotus, Ockham: — Emphasis on freedom of God

Beginning with Francis, our tradition has emphasized God especially as the Good (Earlier Rule, 23): “You are Good, all Good, supreme Good.” In light of the good, Francis’s understands God as both
transcendent, infinite mystery and immanently related to us through the Incarnation. “The Most High Father” is shown to us, as to Philip, in the beloved Son (Adm. 1).

For Francis, the Spirit is the ‘theological center’ of his spirituality. Everything begins with the Spirit and returns through the Son to the Father. He indicates in both earlier and later rules that everything begins with the Spirit of the Lord. The main point of the [Christian] life is to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy manner of working. God is both apophatic [no one is worthy to mention God’s name] and cataphatic [the Beauty that shines through creation]. Thus, I think it is appropriate to say that Francis understands God as a coincidence of opposites [altissime et piissime in Bonaventure’s terms]. As the Most High who is intimately related to us in the Incarnation, Francis’s God is a humble God and he specifically emphasizes the humility of God in his writings. Thus God’s omnipotence is not a patriarchal type of power but the diffusion of overflowing goodness, the fullness of love, hidden in the details of the created world. Bonaventure picks up the notion of God as overflowing goodness and borrows the notion of bonum diffusivum sui from the Pseudo-Dionysius to emphasize God as the self-diffusive Good as the heart of the Trinitarian communion of divine persons. This makes the good (love) the center of all reality. While the notion of goodness undergirds creativity within the Godhead, it is also the basis of divine fecundity. For Bonaventure divine fecundity lies within the Godhead so that while God is intimately related to the world through the good, God is also independent of the world as infinite fecund goodness. God is a coincidence of opposites. As the Most High, God is also intimately related to us as ultimate goodness. The humility of God in Bonaventure’s writings is described as God turned towards us — as the Father is turned towards the Word in the Godhead and towards us through the Word. The turning towards the other corresponds to the communication of love so that the Father is hidden in the eternal Word, and in creation as the finite expression of the Word. Bonaventure places less emphasis on the Spirit than Francis. However, the significance of the Spirit as that vivifying power of love who joins one to Christ and brings one into union with the Father and Son, is present in his writings.

John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham add an emphasis on the freedom of God’s actions: no one and no thing compel God’s good actions. Thus while Bonaventure emphasizes God as overflowing goodness or self-communicative love, Scotus emphasizes divine freedom. In essence, absolute love is absolutely free. However, Bonaventure’s emphasis on love corresponds to relationality whereas Scotus/Ockham’s emphasis on freedom corresponds to contingency. By shifting the emphasis from love to freedom, God becomes “one step” removed from the world and the theological conditions for modern science are established!

II. Christ, The Incarnate Word

Francis: — Humility of God — Sine proprio — (from biographies) Incarnation as salvific

Clare: — Christ as Mirror

Bonaventure: — Primary reason for Incarnation: God’s excess love and mercy — Exemplarism and Christ as exemplar — Christocentric metaphysics (Hex. 1.17) — Mysticism of historical event (Tree of Life)

Angela of Foligno: — Mysticism of the humanity of Christ (Memorial) Jacopone da Todi: Affective mysticism focused on humanity of Christ (Laudes)

Scotus: — Primacy of Christ. The Franciscan Tradition places the Incarnation squarely at the heart of all reality. Francis sees the Incarnation as the expression of the poverty and humility of God, daily represented in the Eucharist (Adm. 1). Christ is the mediator between God and humanity and reconciles these opposites in the unity of his person. Clare encourages Agnes of Prague to consider the circumstances of Christ’s birth, life and death as a mirror in which to see God’s love.

Theologically, Bonaventure considers the Incarnation as motivated by God’s desire to express loving goodness. The Incarnation cannot be necessitated by anything less than God. Thus, it is willed for its own sake and not for the sake of a lesser good. The reason for the Incarnation is simply the excess love and mercy of God. While the notion of the primacy of Christ resides in Bonaventure’s thought, he does admit that sin is a reason for the Incarnation, albeit the last one. In addition to primacy, Bonaventure emphasizes that the purpose of the Incarnation is both redemption and completion. That is, the Incarnation is the goal and center of creation and its consummation. The notion of primacy will be put even more strongly by John Duns Scotus who affirms that Christ would have come even if Adam had not sinned. God’s goodness, not human sin, is the motive for the Incarnation. For Scotus, God’s first intention is Christ (doctrine of the Primacy of Christ), and all reality is to be read as subsequent to that intention. He is the first Adam, without sin, Mary the first
Eve, also without sin (doctrine of the Immaculate Conception). The primacy of Christ remains a fundamentally important piece of the Franciscan Tradition worth further reflection today.

Bonaventure also builds the foundation for the Christocentrism of our heritage, making Christ the exemplar or model for all things. Moreover, he establishes Christ as the metaphysical center of the universe thus Christianizing Neoplatonism. By doing so, he locates truth and knowledge in the person of Christ so that universals are located on the level of the singular and personal. By developing a theological metaphysics, he reconciles philosophy and theology, thus avoiding the inclination of philosophy to become a self-sufficient discipline of knowledge. Theology is maintained as the path to holiness. His meditations on the life of Christ (Tree of Life) help to create a method of meditation leading to ecstatic union while firmly based on historical events.

Angela of Foligno (Memorial) gives us a personal testimony of how affective, imaginative participation in such meditation leads to the kind of union Bonaventure describes. The use of the senses and the imagination lead Angela to union with Christ crucified in such a way that physical nature [flesh] is given a positive role in relationship to God. In his poetry (Laudes) Jacopone da Todi expresses lyrically and dramatically the spirituality described by Bonaventure and experienced by Angela.

In the thought of John Duns Scotus the fact of Christ, the Incarnation of the Son, becomes the center of all reality. The Incarnation was willed by God from all eternity, and all things were created in light of this central event. Scotus affirms that Christ would have come even if Adam had not sinned. The Incarnation is the fullest expression of divine goodness: it does not happen as a result of some other action, e.g., human sin. Here lies the most emphatic expression of the “Primacy of Christ,” or Franciscan Christocentrism. On this basis much of the later Franciscan theological tradition will be built.

Contemporary translation-interpretation of the Franciscan notion of the Primacy of Christ may be of significant help today in overcoming adversarial notions of the relationship of religion to science, faith to reason, or Church to society.

III. The Passion and Death of Christ

Francis: — Compassion with the suffering Christ — Compassion with suffering humanity
Clare: — Christ as the Mirror on the Cross

Bonaventure: — Metaphysical centrality of Christ crucified

Angela of Foligno: — Identification with the suffering Christ

Jacopone: — Dramatization of the Passion in Lyric Influence in the Arts: — The realistic panel-crucifixes of Franciscan art

Affirming that Christ’s passion and death is an expression of self-giving love, our theological and spiritual heritage at its origins avoids the language of “atonement” or the Passion as “repaying a debt” to an outraged God. Francis expresses tender compassion (co-suffering) with the suffering Christ, and credits his conversion to the Lord’s leading him among the suffering, the lepers (Test.). He speaks of following the footprints of Christ, identifying the footprints with the suffering Christ.

Clare’s “Mirror” is the One who hangs on the cross, inviting passersby to “see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.” She encourages Agnes to gaze into that cross, quite likely having the crucifix of San Damiano in mind. Clare formulates a ‘theology of the Crucified’ by indicating that Christ crucified is the image of God in which we are to be transformed in the contemplation of God. She advises Agnes to gaze, consider, contemplate and imitate. Clare distinguishes following Christ from imitating Christ, associating imitation with transformation in the image of the Crucified, thus becoming Christ for others. Christ is expressed in the form of compassionate love.

Bonaventure makes the Crucified Christ the center of his theology, particularly after his retreat at La Verna in 1259, as he meditated on Francis as the likeness of the Crucified Christ. This implies the ability to read the experience of another, a contemporary, as a revelation of the mystery of Christ. Theologically, Bonaventure emphasizes Christ crucified as the absolute center between God and humanity — there is no other path to God other than through the Crucified. Since union with God is expressed in compassionate love, Bonaventure holds up the desire for martyrdom as a spiritual state. The Christian is to be both mystic and missionary, willing to suffer or sacrifice one’s life for the sake of the gospel [perhaps the medieval
counterpart of political theology.] Bonaventure’s wisdom theology is based on union with the crucified Christ.

Using vivid, even disturbing, language Angela describes her personal participation in representations of the Passion (early mystery plays), and the profound religious experiences that moved her from meditation to service of the sick in local hospitals (notably lepers). Angela’s graphic description of union with Christ crucified depicts a knowledge of God that departs from the intellectual tradition. God is known by means of the flesh and through personal experience. Angela’s testimony upholds the spiritual life as a dialogical relationship with the other. That is, a person is defined in and through relationship with the other [resonates with ‘postmodem’ spirituality]. Angela’s spirituality shows that God is intimately involved with humanity and seeks to embrace humanity in love.

The great hymns to the Cross as life-giving tree, and the plaintive hymns of compassion for the sufferings of Mary mark some of the best known compositions of Jacopone, some apparently set to music for public performance.

Such devotion to the human aspect of the suffering of Christ and Mary appears artistically in the increasingly realistic portrayals of the suffering and death of Christ in representations of the Crucifixion commissioned for Franciscan churches, gradually spreading throughout the Western Church.

While frankly admitting past exaggerations of “affective devotion” to the suffering Christ, a return to healthy, heart-felt devotional practice may be of significant help in filling a contemporary lacuna of solid, accessible forms of Catholic piety in today’s multicultural ecclesial reality.

IV. View of the World, Creation

Francis: — Brother-sister relationship

Bonaventure: — Positive emphasis on creation

Angela of Foligno: — The world pregnant with God

Scotus — Univocity of being — Haecceitas: emphasis on the individual, concrete Francis’s view of creation is sacramental — God shines through creation.

As Bonaventure writes, Francis saw the Beauty of God within the beautiful things of creation. Through his union with Christ, he came to perceive his own integral relation to creation. He identified the things of this earth as brothers and sisters, recognizing that they have the same primordial source of goodness as himself. Creation is light-filled, replete with goodness, and related to humanity. Bonaventure described creation as emanating out of the relationship between the Father and Son. Thus creation is grounded in relationship and is a mirror and book of the Triune God. Everything in creation, from the quark to the human person, reflects the Trinity. Bonaventure’s doctrine of exemplarism connotes a doctrine of relations between God and creation. That is, the Trinity is expressed on every level of creation, from vestige to image to similitude. Matter, for Bonaventure, tends towards spirit; thus, there is a drive within creation towards the spiritual. However, the material world is unable to attain its [spiritual] perfection without the human person who is a unique ‘synthesis’ of spirit and matter. Thus to have dominion over creation is to recognize the human’s responsibility towards creation. These ideas relate to and reflect a cosmic Christocentricity as found in the writings of P. Teilhard de Chardin. Angela’s insight to the world being ‘pregnant with God’ flows out of her deep union with Christ crucified in which she comes to understand the immanence of God in and through Christ, again, a type of cosmic Christocentricity. The Franciscan insight to creation, in general, is related to contemplation of the mystery of Christ as Word. This Word, incarnate, serves as the underlying blueprint or form for all of created reality, rendering all attention to creation religiously significant to the Christian believer. Along these lines, Scotus’s principle of haecceitas, connoting individuation, grounds the intrinsic goodness of each and every thing in creation, emphasizing the dignity of every creature. Even beyond this notion of the specific and the individual, Scotus asserts that the being of creatures is as “true” as the being of the Creator, and is not just an “analogy” of divine being. This notion of the “univocity of being” posits a fundamental connection between the things of the world and God. Such attention to particularity, diversity, uniqueness as divinely known and loved offers one possible response to issues of minorities in society, the ability to accept differences as enriching and as a caution against totalitarian philosophical, social, or ecclesial claims.
V. Natural Sciences

**Robert Grosseteste** - metaphysics of light

**Roger Bacon** — Empirical reasoning — Positive value of creation

**Ramon Llull** — Science and evangelization

**Ockham** — Beginnings of modern science The English Franciscan tradition in particular tends to affirms the physical world as something worth knowing in itself.

Scholars of this important strand of our tradition emphasized knowledge of the particular, and ultimately helped to validate the study of natural sciences, history, and the human sciences as significant to the religious enterprise itself. For the medievalist, knowledge of the human sciences was essential to the task of theology.

"The perfect theologian ought to be not moderately learned in the human sciences." Understanding creation, therefore, encompassed both metaphysics and Scripture. The fact that the first manifestation of the divine fiat is light [in Genesis] gave to light a special place of importance in the universe. R. Grosseteste assigned to light the role of first substantial form in the universe from which all subsequent forms in part derive [an idea also held by Bonaventure]. The use of Aristotle's writings became the basis of pursuing science. Thus, in the work of Roger Bacon, nothing in the world could be known without experience, since knowledge derives from sense data. Ideas such as microcosm – macrocosm, cause and effect, also helped pave the way for modern science. With a mystical and missionary bent, the Catalan Ramon Llull attempted a vast organization of all human knowledge within a theological framework. It was, ultimately, a plan for the revision of all human knowledge in his day. His grand synthesis, never fully realized, points once again toward the Franciscan desire to assert a profound underlying unity to all phenomena, rooted in a mysticism of the centrality of Christ. William of Ockham is famous for his frequently misunderstood "razor," ("Plurality should not be assumed without necessity") arguing against the multiplication of unnecessary abstractions in our attempts to understand reality. This principle of modesty in approaching reality, and his opposition to exaggerated claims about "universal" concepts as things that really exist, are credited by some with setting the stage for knowledge as observable data and contingency of effects, contributing to the beginnings of modern approaches to scientific observation.

The Franciscan Tradition offers a helpful point of contact for contemporary believers striving toward substantive dialogue between the worlds of theology and the sciences. Further, it offers a religious, theological motivation for engagement in the study of the sciences, research and experimentation.

VI. View of the Human Person

**Francis** — Conversion, from “bitter to sweet” (Test.) — dignity of the human person as imago Dei (Adm. 5) — Brother-sister relationship (Ltr. to Faithful) — community/relationality — poverty as inter-dependency, importance of work (Rule 5)

**Alexander of Hales** (Summa):— Emphasis on goodness — Role of grace

**Bonaventure** — Primacy of affectus (Itin. 7) — Human person as image of God; thus grace-filled nature (Itin. 2-3) — Original goodness/ original justice — Role of compassionate love especially in movement towards historical peace

**Scotus**: — Moral goodness (harmony of goodness) — Emphasis on contingency

**Ockham**: — Voluntarism, primacy of the will. Francis viewed the human person as created in the image of God in body and spirit. Because the true image is Christ, Francis perceived the human person as an image of Christ.

The Father is hidden in the Son. Thus he advocates a bodily context of relationship with God precisely through the other — “tasting” God in the other becomes an experience of sweetness. By identifying a shared ground with all of humanity in and through the suffering Christ, Francis locates the body as a ground of connection and familiarity. We are truly united to one another as brother and sister. Impeded by sin from truly seeing the other as family, Francis pursues a path of radical poverty by which we live without possession of anything so that we may be free to love the other in whom God dwells. Bonaventure's notion of the human person corresponds to that of Francis. The soul does not assume priority over the body nor is it encased within the body in a Platonic fashion; rather, the soul is given its nobility by the body and the body
needs the soul for perfection. Thus, body and soul are ordained to one another. The wholeness of the human person as matter-spirit is what Bonaventure strives for in his theology. The nobility of the human person lies in being created as image of God. While the image connotes capacity for union with the infinite God of love, the image is distorted by sin yielding intellectual blindness and self-grasping. Christ, the Word, is the true image in which human persons are to be restored [made whole] not only for oneself but for the healing and wholeness of the world. Scotus’s notion of haecceitas is the ground of individuality which gives each being a singular and unique character and which makes it what it is and distinguishes it from others. The term refers to the totality of concreteness of which the human body is the most visible expression. He holds together the primacy of Christ and the autonomy of the person. We are endowed with a freedom which has a relationship of mutuality with the divine freedom. Genuine exercise of human freedom is a freedom-in-love. Human dignity is taken up in a dialogic relationship that truly allows the person to emerge and come to fulfillment. The person is a mystery of knowing and agency, of autonomy and mutual relatedness, and of the universal and the most concrete particularity.

Such a view of the human person as imaging divine goodness, in radical solidarity with the human experience of God in Christ, helps to ground dedication to the defense of human rights, economic and social justice, and the pursuit of peace-making, by linking an incarnate spirituality with efforts for social change.

VII. View of the Church

Francis: — church as the mystical body of Christ — gospel of presence

Alexander of Hales (Summa fratr. Alexandri) — Sacramental theology

Bonaventure: — The place of Gospel life in the Church

Peter John Olivi: — Poverty and Church authority, the usus pauper controversy

Scotus: — Papal Church and national church

Ockham: — Theory of separate spheres for Church and state. Francis’s understanding of the church is broad – very inclusive – and spirit-oriented. The church is the mystical body of Christ – not as an institution but as a living person – a body that continues to grow through participation of its members in the Christ mystery.

To Bonaventure, the Church is both the body of Christ and the creation of the Spirit for the glory of the Father. There are three forms of communio in his thought. First, there is corporal or external communion, which corresponds to the Church in its historico-juridical form. Second, there is interior communion, which points to the mystery of grace as uniting believers. Finally, there is sacramental communion, which realizes in time the action of Christ, particularly in the Eucharist. The Church is all three and comes to expression in a Trinitarian formulation: the visible Church exists only through the life-giving sacramental actions of Christ and in the actual mission of the Holy Spirit effecting interior bonds of communion among the members here and now. Understanding Church as communion marks our ecclesial personhood. To be a person is to be a person in communion. The roots of this understanding are Trinitarian. To be a person in the Church is to live out both the life of Christ and to be open to the new possibilities and impulses imparted by the Spirit who brings us into the fullness of Christ as we return to the Father, the source of life. The writings of Peter John Olivi explored a quite different aspect of the Church: the limits of its leaders’ authority. In the long and painful controversy over the understanding of Francis’ Rule and Testament, Olivi helped to point toward an allegiance to the Gospel deeper and more demanding than acquiescence to Church authority.

Both Bonaventure and Scotus had the painful experience of seeing their vision of Church rejected and vilified by others. In Bonaventure’s case, it was the clerical elite of the university who rejected his view of an essentially international Church, and an understanding of Gospel life that was not bound to structures of parish and diocese (Secular-Mendicant controversy).

Scotus suffered exile from France as a result of his defending the claims of an international Church, operating under the direction of the Pope, against the claims of a national and nationalistic church under its monarch (conflict with Philip the Fair).

William of Ockham, along with the Minister General, Michael of Cesena, eventually fled the papal court and rejected the authority of Pope John XXII in disputes arising from the interpretation of the Franciscan evangelical life. Taking refuge with “secular” authority (the German Emperor), Ockham used these events in his reflections on the autonomous authority of the secular state in relation to the Church, a position with far-reaching implications for understanding the relationship of Church and world.
The Franciscan Tradition may offer a healthy alternative vision of Church beyond the parochial and the diocesan model, emphasizing the universal and international character of the Church community. While promoting lively and effective participation in the life of local churches, this tradition constantly challenges the Church to remember the wider world: “the Saracens and other non-believers” and the legitimate freedom of political processes.

VIII. Philosophy and Theology: The Franciscan Wisdom Tradition

Francis: — Theologians ministers of spirit and life — Sacred theology not to extinguish prayer and devotion

Anthony: — Scripture commentaries

Alexander of Hales (Summa fratris Alexandri) — Habitus fidei (perfecting the intellect with the intention of forming the affectus)

Bonaventure: — Purpose of theology as path to holiness — Wisdom explored through Christ mysticism

Spanish Franciscan Mystics: — Affection and contemplation.

As a person with limited education, Francis placed primary emphasis on the spirit of prayer although he did not oppose the study of theology. In fact he seemed to have approved the teaching of theology as long as it did not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion. The purpose of studying theology is to preach the Gospel, and he advocated respect for theologians as ministers of God’s Word. Anthony of Padua is the first of these theologians (Ltr. Ant.), and his Scriptural commentaries and sermons help us to appreciate the tradition’s strong connections to earlier theological tradition, especially that of the Victorine school and the broad Augustinian tradition. Those writing about theology within the University had the greater challenge of identifying the purpose of theology vis-à-vis philosophy. Alexander of Hales saw the pursuit of [theological] knowledge as necessary for the development of affectus. Theology is not an end in itself but a means to love God, that is, a path to holiness. The motto of this approach is frequently seen in older Franciscan schools: “In sanctitate et doctrina,” connecting learning to holiness. Bonaventure explores this further in his writings, writing against Averroism and the tendency to separate out philosophy as an independent discipline. While both Platonism and Aristotelianism are helpful to understand theological concepts, they should not be held independently of theology: philosophy is at the service of theology (philosophia ancilla theologiae). Since theology is rooted in Scripture, Bonaventure said that the defects of Greek philosophy stand open to correction in light of the New Testament. Thus he posits a new theological metaphysics based on Christ as center. The pursuit of knowledge is not a matter of the intellect alone but ‘head and heart’ work together. The goal of theology, therefore, is not scientia but sapientia, that is, knowledge deepened by love. Christ crucified, he states, is the treasury of wisdom and knowledge.

Under the influence of the theologians of the traditions the writers and teachers of spirituality within the Franciscan tradition carried this Wisdom approach into the realm of mysticism. Following the traces of Bonaventure’s itinerarium, Hendrik Herp (Harphius) insisted on simple, accessible methods of contemplative practice based on the affections, aiming at the highest degree of union with God. In his wake the Franciscan mystical writers of Spain developed methods of “recollection” and quiet prayer (Francisco de Osuna) that gave pride of place to the heart in contemplative practice. Their contributions helped to connect the excitement of the Age of Discovery with a sense of inner exploration (Bernardino de Laredo) that also had notable influences on writers better-known today (Teresa of Avila).

In this regard the Franciscan tradition may help to promote a dialogue on important issues of Christian faith and “how we are to live” in contemporary society, translating intellectually-understood truth into experienced goodness.

IX. Economics, Property and Poverty

Francis: — living “sine proprio”

Early Franciscan Masters: — Property ownership and nature

Scotus: — Division of ownership

Social reform: — Health-care for the poor — The montes pietatis. Francis’ notion of life according to the Holy Gospel includes living “sine proprio”, a term sometimes translated as “without property,” or “without anything of one’s own.”
The only one who owns anything is God, the source of all-good. To claim anything as “mine,” whether material goods, offices, knowledge, or virtue, is to sin against the Lord whose lordship extends over all things. The only thing we can truly claim as our own are “vices and sins,” since these clearly do not come from God. Everything created is good, and everything good belongs to God, the Highest Good. We recognize our true identity when we acknowledge that all things come from God to us as gifts, and we rightly return every good thing to God through giving thanks and praise for the gifts we have received.

For Francis the commitment to “holy poverty” means to recognize our true state: we are the recipients of the alms God graciously gives to us each day. The greatest almsgiving on God’s part is the gift of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word who became poor for our sakes through the Incarnation, in order to make us rich in every gift of God. The starting-point of Francis’ poverty is expressly Christological, though it would be expressed also through plain economic facts (not owning land or houses or living by guaranteed forms of income).

Work and “recourse to the table of the Lord” were to assure the necessities of life for the brothers. Together with the other pauperes of their day, the brothers were to “go confidently for alms,” “the inheritance of the poor,” won for them by Christ. After Francis, the early masters of the “Franciscan School” carried forward seminal insights of the founder and, at the Universities of Paris and Oxford especially, put those insights into new forms of philosophical and theological language. The Summa Fratris Alexandri, at the beginning of this tradition, approaches the question conservatively: both communion of goods and distinction of ownership proceed from the law of nature. Richard of Middleton, allows private ownership of property, but recognizes such ownership as a result of the fall. Peter John Olivi analyzes carefully the meanings of ownership and use in his writing in the usus pauper controversy over papal interpretations of the Franciscan Rule.

On another point, however, the law of nature cannot be invoked: that of the private ownership (dominium) of property. This, in fact, revokes the law of nature, for in the state of innocence “communion of goods” was the natural norm: erant omnia omnibus communia, [all things were common to everyone] a strong medieval tradition with roots in Augustine.

Scotus’ emphasis on the immense difference between the natural order and societies founded on divided ownership has its origins in Franciscan reflections on poverty, which became a “scandalous” characteristic of the Friars Minor in discussions of the poverty of Christ and the Apostles during the reign of John XXII. As he indicates, a special concern for the connection between poverty and property was at the very basis of Franciscan self-understanding, and this was expanded into a particular sensitivity about production and distribution of wealth within society. This concern is apparent in the attention given by Franciscan authors, including Scotus, to the question of usury. In this regard, Scotus follows the argumentation of his predecessor, Friar Peter John Olivi, in addressing the question of restitution for sins of usury. In this (Franciscan) view, only the money originally received was to be returned, since further profit is the result of industry on the part of usurer, and thus not the property of the offended party. “Only an emphasis on continuity between the state of innocence and the state of fallen nature made it possible to consider absolute poverty as a choice for absolute perfection.” No wonder John XXII strove to revise traditional Scriptural interpretation of his day, to assert that Adam was a property-holder!

Contributions to social reform were also made by Franciscan men and women in the offering of health care to the poor, and in the establishment of early low-interest lending institutions (montes de pietate). Examination of these areas would certainly help to expand our view of Franciscan contributions to the theory and practice of justice, contributing to our contemporary reflection on the issue of human economic rights.

Living sine proprio became an identifying characteristic of the Franciscan tradition, with expressions in its spirituality, its Christology, its anthropology, and, eventually in political and economic positions. Today the Franciscan tradition can draw from some of our authors of the past to offer a different view of notions of property and the common good. Considering the intense debates over human rights in the context of economic globalization and environmental destruction, this quintessentially Franciscan topic can offer useful approaches to questions of property and the just distribution and use of the earth’s resources.

The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition and Evangelization

From its very beginnings this intellectual tradition has been seen as a contribution to evangelization. St. Anthony of Padua, well-educated before becoming a friar, was asked to put his learning at the service of the fraternity in two ways: in teaching his brothers theology and in popular preaching. Ramon Llull dedicated his energies to the establishment of language-schools, among other enterprises, in order to equip others for the tasks of preaching, especially in Arabic-speaking countries. The geographical and cultural information
compiled by early Franciscans in Asia (John of Montecorvino in China, Odoric of Pordenone in Tibet) helped to prepare the way for those who would be intent on bringing the Good News to other areas.

The engagement of Franciscan scientists, philosophers and theologians in the major European intellectual centers of the Middle Ages (notably at Oxford, Paris, and Bologna) helped to spread the Franciscan approach to the Gospel in the areopagus of the university.

In the Americas, too, rigorous intellectual preparation provided a solid foundation for those called to live by example and preach by word the Gospel of peace. It was no accident that the greatest early ethnographer of Mexico was the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagun, and that the pioneer of the California Missions, Bl. Junipero Serra, was Professor of Scotistic Theology at the University of Mallorca (one named for Ramon Llull).

In every period of Franciscan history which showed increased dedication to evangelization, that phenomenon was matched by revived interest in spirituality and contemplation, on the one hand, and a renewed appreciation of the importance of study. Learning, holiness and evangelization, far from being opposed within our tradition, are in fact partners.

**Conclusion:** This summary of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition indicates only a general framework or outline. But it may be sufficient to demonstrate the riches of our tradition, a “patrimony of the poor.” That patrimony already has a solid basis, as the first steps toward its dissemination have already been taken. In our day the basic, critical work of editing and publishing major original texts of the tradition has been largely accomplished but some significant work remains to be done in this area. The second step of scholarly critical analysis and interpretation of the texts has also been done, abundantly in the cases of some major authors. A third step is currently being accomplished, that of translating the entire major works of the tradition into English.

At this point it becomes crucial for us to undertake the next steps, which will bring the tradition into dialogue with today’s questions: in regard to Christian faith, the life of the Church, the world of science and culture, and the needs and longings of the human family. In order to accomplish this, our current task, we will need the collaboration of members of the English-speaking Franciscan Family, the contributions of scholars interested in Franciscan authors and themes, and the advice of experts in pedagogy and communications. To paraphrase a familiar Franciscan saying, our brothers and sisters in the past did what was theirs to do, may Christ now show us what is ours.