

society. This is where that ideological suspicion comes in which I discussed in my first article. Next time I shall discuss some mechanisms of social injustice and the traditional Christian response to them.

- 1 It is perhaps observations of this kind which cause liberal conservative theorists such as Hayek (as discussed by Weislaw Lang, "Marxism, Liberalism and Justice" in Kamenka and Tay op. cit. – pp 116-148) to declare that the moral concept of desert has no place in the distribution mechanisms of a free society. The value of people's work is "articulated in the price which people are ready to pay for service, regardless of the moral deserts of the people rendering the services. There is no link between commutative justice (the only form of justice) and the personal circumstances, virtues, needs and desires of the parties" (Lang p 131). On this theory, social justice is a mirage, interfering with the natural working of the market society. It introduces morality where it can only cause damage and loss of freedom to individuals. Moral concepts like justice only have a place in interpersonal relationships. This position, while being fundamentally amoral, is more honest than the conventional one which attributes real moral significance to a person's rise or fall in the market society. But it is also incoherent, since the freedom of a few is only gained at the expense of the slavery of the majority.
- 2 Miller rejects this possibility on the ground of sociological 'facts': i.e. that the working class are no more egalitarian in their ideals and practices than are the middle class. But a Marxist would say that questions of this kind cannot be answered by reliance on sociological research into the ideals and motives of people in present society. These ideals and motives are conditioned by ideologies and the possibilities open to people and do not reflect a permanent "human nature" which has to be taken into account in all possible societies.

St Francis: In Perfect Imitation – A Textual Meditation on his Christocentric Vision¹

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St Francis of Assisi is perhaps one of those few men of whom it can be said fairly: He is a man for all times. Much has been said and will no doubt be said on the reasons for this wonderful popularity which somehow seems to transcend the bounds of time and conquer the hearts of men of all creeds and none. There are indeed many reasons why Francis of Assisi continues to hold such a magnetic sway over the lives of so many but it would seem that at the very core of all of these is the Christ-centredness of his life. For St Francis, Christ Jesus, Incarnate, Crucified and Risen, was all. He it is who was the pattern to which Francis would conform himself

totally. St Francis made no conditions but rather he made a total surrender. In a manner at once simple and direct and yet immensely profound do the writings of this most human of saints ring out with the clear affirmation: *Deus Meus et Omnia!* In this meditation an attempt will be made to illustrate from these writings the christo-centric character of St Francis' way of life and to show how such considerations can be sharply relevant to our times.

The devotion of St Francis to the humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ opened to him the very possibility of seeing all things in their true perspective. He saw that all things are centred on Christ in whom they have their origin, from whom they receive their meaning and in whom they will be restored when He comes in glory.² The late Fr Cajetan Esser has noted that "What characterized Francis' way of following Christ was that it was wholly a matter of love. It grew out of love and in turn led to love"³ This surrender to love was manifested in the attempts made by St Francis to reproduce even the life events of his Lord, in whose footsteps he wished most perfectly to walk. Christ was indeed to be his *Way* his *Truth* and his *Life*, (cf *Jn.* 14:6; *I Pet.* 2:21)⁴ Not only did he wish to do this but he wished those who would come after him to do likewise. This did St Clare grasp with characteristic succinctness:

"The Son of God became for us the Way ... and that Way our Blessed Father Francis, His true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example."⁵

It is significant that St Francis should give not only verbal exhortation but also practical example. The sources of Franciscan spirituality, and especially those which concern the life of St Francis specifically witness to a variety of ways in which he set out vividly to portray just what it was that the Lord meant to him and what He could mean to all men. We read that in 1223 on Christmas night at Greccio Francis re-enacted the circumstances of Christ's birth:

"... The saint stood before the crib and his heart overflowed with tender compassion; he was bathed in tears but overcome with joy. The Mass was sung there and Francis, who was a deacon, sang the Gospel. Then he preached to the people about the birth of the poor king, whom he called the Babe of Bethlehem in his tender love. A knight called John from Greccio a pious and truthful man who had abandoned his profession in the world for love of Christ and was a great friend of St Francis, claimed that he saw a beautiful child asleep in the crib and that St Francis took it in his arms and seemed to wake it up ..."⁶

On another occasion St Francis retired to an island on Lake Trasimene and there, in honour of the Lord's fast, fasted forty days. It is reported by Bartholomew of Pisa that on at least three occasions

St Francis re-enacted the account of the last supper.⁷ The crowning point, so to speak, of this literal imitation and all consuming desire to conform himself must be the reception of the sacred stigmata on 17th September 1224. This was the summit which culminated in contemplative union:

“True love of Christ now transformed his lover into his image and when the forty days which he had intended spending in solitude were over and the feast of St Michael had come, St Francis came down from the mountain. With him he bore a representation of Christ crucified which was not the work of an artist in wood or stone, but had been reproduced in the members of his body by the hand of the living God.”⁸

In this way does St Bonaventure speak of St Francis’ ascent to Christ by the grace of God through his total adherence to the Gospel in a concrete existential manner. Here the mystery of Christ crucified was definitively revealed to him and, in another place, St Bonaventure tells of St Francis’ response to the request of some friars who had asked him to teach them how to pray:

“Christ’s cross was their book and they studied it day and night at the exhortation and after the example of their father who never stopped talking to them about the cross. When the friars asked him to teach them how to pray, he said, ‘When you pray, say the Our Father, and We adore you, O Christ, in all your churches in the whole world and we thank you, because by your holy cross you redeemed the world’.”⁹

Here again we can see Francis’ almost instinctively direct approach which is clearly akin to Our Lord’s approach. He does not answer the question by posing more questions or by delivering a homily on prayer but rather he gives the questioners something to say. The cross of Christ filled Francis with an intense joy and yet an awareness of the unfathomable love which Christ exhibited by His dying on the cross. The cross is the ikon of renunciation for it is the supreme sign of true evangelical poverty, humility and generosity which moved Francis to the very depths of his being. Christ, by his ultimate act of pure love had raised the human condition to a new level of meaning by embracing it and making it a part of himself. In this way Christ, for St Francis, truly made himself our brother.

*Friar Christ and Universal Brotherhood*¹⁰

In his *Letter to All the Faithful* we read:

“How holy and beloved, how pleasing and lowly, how peaceful, delightful, lovable and desirable above all things it is to have a brother like this, who laid down his life for his sheep.”¹¹

In this passage we touch upon a central theme of St Francis, namely, that the Lord of the universe is our brother! The primordial

notion of 'Brother/Sister' was given a new universality by St Francis. From a consideration of the fact that Christ is our brother comes the realization that, since all things receive their meaning from him, they are therefore also our brothers and sisters. This is expressed by one of the biographers of St Francis who writes:

"Since the strength of Francis' love made him a brother to all creatures, it is not surprising that the charity of Christ made him more than a brother to those who are stamped with the image of their Creator." ¹²

St Francis loved all created things precisely because of their Creator and the fact that they are loved. For example, St Francis blesses Brother Fire on the occasion of the cauterization he reluctantly underwent to avert possible blindness:

"Brother Fire, so noble and useful among other creatures be gentle to me in this hour, for I have always loved you and will always do so for love of him who created you ..." ¹³

Elsewhere Francis praises the divine artist for the beauty and abundant variety of creation in which can be traced the footprints of God. Creation is the book in which can be read, in a certain sense, the autobiography of God. In all things God discloses something about himself and something about ourselves. This St Francis perceived because he was in tune with it. Francis' very consciousness was in union with the harmony of the created order. As God-made-Man became a part of creation so Francis could read in creation the signs of His presence. Knowing God to be present in creation Francis realized the futility of man's attempts to dominate it in terms of having unlimited power over it and sought rather to give example by co-operating with it in its effort to grow and develop to maturity. There could be no co-operation without first recognizing his own limitations and his dependence. Thus it became necessary to treat all created persons and matter as brother and sister, through with and in Christ who is The Brother:

"You are all brothers. Call no one your father on earth, for your only father is in heaven. Neither be called master, for you have only one master (*Mt. 23:8-10*) who is in heaven ..." ¹⁴

In being a brother of Christ we are therefore sons of the Father by virtue of our adoption as His children. As the Trinity is a community in oneness so we are called to be united as brothers in community and thus are enabled to participate in that unity which finds its origin in the Trinity itself. Again, in his *Letter to All the Faithful*, Francis reminds us that if we want God's Holy Spirit to make a dwelling in our hearts it is first necessary that we become like Christ who did not seek to have power and domination but who humbled himself for our sakes. It is also incumbent upon us to do good for it is in this way that we give Him birth. St Francis understood clearly that if we are not to be accused of exploiting

both man and matter then we must be prepared to accept both as our equal and this because we are redeemed, (Cf. *Jn.* 3:16-17) and that, rather than flee the world, as Francis was so often tempted to do, it is necessary to embrace it for love of the saviour and on account of redemption. It would be impossible to accuse St Francis of pantheism! though there is undoubtedly something 'primitive' in his feeling for creation. There is a certain way, as already mentioned, in which he can rightly be described as being in tune with the harmony of creation. This is nothing more than what happens when the Gospel message is given full expression. Because St Francis loved all things on account of their maker he loved all men because of the dignity bestowed on them by the Creator:

"Try to realize the dignity God has confirmed on you. He created and formed your body in the image of his beloved Son, and your soul in his own likeness (*Gn.* 1:26) ..." ¹⁵

It was in realizing this that St Francis was able to live with the leper, resolve disputes and preach to the Sultan. Francis transcended the self-protective barriers which kept men apart and in their place restored the trust upon which true brotherhood could be built. This mission of reconciliation was a direct response to a Divine mandate and in his *Testament* we read:

"God revealed a form of greeting to me, telling me that we should say, 'The Lord give you Peace'." ¹⁶

The active commitment to peace-making is a sure way by which it is possible to avoid *majoritas* and a way of remaining in a state of freely chosen *minoritas*. The pursuit of this ideal is impossible without the willingness to empty oneself just as Christ had done on Calvary. This is what is meant by an 'engagement to liberty' as Fr Cajetan Esser has phrased it. What is more, there is a means whereby we can be strengthened in this mission: the Eucharist.

The Eucharist: Source of Fraternity ¹⁷

The Holy Eucharist was, for St Francis, the most sure way of being united with Christ. Here is the very meeting point between God and Man, in a person who can be known and loved and who gives love in return for love. It is with this conviction that he exhorts his followers:

"Kissing your feet with all the love I am capable of, I beg you to show the greatest possible reverence and honour for the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things, whether on earth or in heaven, have been brought to peace and reconciled with Almighty God (*Col.* I: 20)." ¹⁸

In this way St Francis makes the Eucharist the very source of life and reconciliation for the Lord of majesty has, under the humble forms of bread and wine, entered into union with all men of good-

will and restored the bridge between God and man.¹⁹ The divine humility was particularly attractive to St Francis and he took every opportunity to manifest this reality in all that he said, wrote and did. He made himself a *Herald of the Great King* that he might announce to the whole world, to creation, that the Lord Jesus whom he served was indeed the Lord of all and our brother.²⁰ To employ another image used by St Francis of himself, he became a new fool for Christ. His whole life was to be nothing other than a sermon on the infinite love of the Most High. Once Francis had had the very mystery of the crucified Christ revealed to him he could do nothing other than proclaim this love which invites all to holiness and union. The Eucharist is the source of the brotherhood which provides also the focal point where fraternal unity can most perfectly be expressed. Christ is central to the gathering as a brother and leads us, in the Spirit, to the Father who is all compassion and gentleness. There is a movement into the Trinitarian community but it also has a mission into the community of the human family. This brotherhood conceives of its mission through the attentive listening to and meditation upon the Word of God.

St Francis and the Gospels

St Francis' approach to the written word of God in general and to the Gospels in particular forms the complement to his Eucharistic Christology. The scriptures were never regarded as texts to be simply read but rather as concrete expression of the presence of Christ in the world. Thus they had a personal character for in them was to be found an inexhaustible source of knowledge of the Lord. They revealed the Word who was spoken and sent and it was for this reason that Francis held them in high regard. The very basis of his form of life was scriptural and the biblical notion of 'The Way' figures prominently in Francis' radical interpretation of them. Because St Francis had this incarnational approach to the written word he was able to grasp the very essence of the scriptures. In perfect imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ he came to understand the inner dynamism of His recorded activity and teaching, and what is more, Francis realized that by prayerful and constant meditation on the words of the Gospels it was possible to understand something of the nature of true religious experience:

"Sacred Scripture tells us that the Father dwells in light inaccessible (*I Tim.* 6:10) and that God is spirit (*Jn.* 4:24) and St John adds, no one at any time has seen God (*Jn.* 1:24). Because God is a spirit he can only be seen in spirit. It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing (*Jn.* 6:64). But God the Son is equal to the Father and so he too can be seen only in the same way as the Father and the Holy Spirit..."²¹

St Bonaventure confirms the fact that it was through constant

meditation and continuous prayer that St Francis was able to determine how best to discover faithfully what he ought to do.²² The Word of the Father took flesh and became man for the sake of the world and thus became the way back to the Father for those who chose to accept the demands of a loving relationship. In the spoken Word is the origin of the human race and it is in the Incarnate Word that the same humanity will be raised and restored.²³ It was with great gratitude that St Francis acknowledged this fact. The scriptures were for St Francis both a source of his personal spiritual life and also the guide to his action. Obedience to the absolute demands of the Gospels was an integral part of that total and unconditional surrender. Thus was his life totally and authentically apostolic and was firmly rooted within the Church to which he most ardently belonged.

St Francis, Apostolate to the Church

The apostolic objective to which Francis had to address himself was imparted to him whilst he prayed before the crucifix in the little part-ruined church of St Damiano, not far from Assisi:

“Repair my House ...”

Thus was Francis’s apostolate to the Church itself. His Rule was to be the *forma evangelii* which was expressed in concrete deeds.²⁴ If the Church was to be sacramentally significant, that is, to be an effective and creative sign of Christ’s presence in the world and of His power to enable all men to realize their dignity and election, it was necessary that the Church be transformed from being an institution weighed down by marginal concerns to a Church keenly aware of its mission to preach the Gospel and witness to the fact of the Resurrection. In order that such a transformation could take place there had to be a shift from a life of power to one of Gospel penance:

“When God gave me some friars, there was no one to tell me what I ought to do; but the Most High himself made it clear to me that I must live the life of the Gospel. I had this written down briefly and simply and His Holiness the Pope confirmed it for me ...”²⁵

Francis saw it as his purpose to call a new people into being and this new people would be available and free to preach the Gospel and proclaim that the Kingdom of God is already being realized in the world. This theme is central to *The Circular Letter of Brother Elias* following on the death of St Francis. This letter has been the subject of specialised studies which have attempted to draw out the rich biblical imagery employed by Elias, who was St Francis’ Vicar General.²⁶ What is important for this study is that Francis, who as we have tried to make clear was always practical, did not set himself up in opposition to the Church of his day but entered into it and sought to repair its fabric and so make it credible as the

means of salvation for all men. By ministering within the Church St Francis saw himself as ministering to Christ himself. His great reverence for priests proceeded from this fact because it is they who minister 'spirit and life'.²⁷ Francis loved the Church on account of the fact that it is the teacher and guardian of the truth and most particularly did he love the Church because it is within the Church that the Eucharist is made available and, as we have seen, the Eucharist is the focal point of true Gospel brotherhood. The very life of all those who chose to follow the way of life mapped out by St Francis was to be a sermon which would lead all to Christ and it was through the living out of the life sermon that they would accomplish the mission to "repair my House". Francis wished all to love the Lord just as a mother loves her children:

"We are mothers to him when we enthrone him in our hearts and souls by love with a pure and sincere conscience, and give him by doing good. This too should be an example to others."²⁸

St Francis saw it as his task to make Christ immediate and available to all who seek Him and so it was imperative that the Church, which is His Mystical Body, should conform itself more perfectly to *The Form* which is Jesus Christ Himself. The doctrine of the primacy of love had not yet been explicitly formulated by Scotus but it is by no means irrelevant to this meditation for it was St Francis's tender love for the Lord and his working out this love in the events of his life which gave the most clear exposition of the value of such a doctrine for the Church. Christ's redemptive act is first due to His love for the world and for man in particular and this love was present from the very beginning when the creative love went forth. This places the person of Jesus Christ at the very centre of the universe as its source and meaning. Love has a two-fold function: it frees and it tends towards unity. In the Franciscan tradition this is expressed by the harmony between action and contemplation. Both tend towards unity in the Trinity of love. Jesus Christ is then most certainly the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is the task of all those who follow the example of the Poverello, whether they be in one of the Orders founded by him or not, to free others and so make it possible for them to participate in the journey of love for the up-building of the Kingdom here in this world.

Concluding Remarks

In this meditation an attempt has been made to say something constructive about the Christocentric character of St Francis' way of life. I have tried to avoid using the term 'spirituality' for the simple reason that I do not wish to imply that an attempt has been made to encompass every aspect of Franciscan Christology. There are many areas which have been left untackled which would throw

a great deal more light on the place of Christ in St Francis' writings. It has been my intention to give some meaningful pointers to the kind of issues present in the writings of the saint and of some other important views of these themes. In conclusion it might be fitting to note that it is in the unconditional adherence to Jesus Christ that the greatest witness can be achieved and so it might be very appropriate that a clear statement be made about the primacy of Christ and the importance of this doctrine for a theology of the world, of man's place in the world and of his responsibility to co-operate with the creative power of God rather than seek to have power over it, and so risk the destruction of the world and of himself with it. St Francis can provide a suitable basis for he is acceptable to Christians and non-Christians alike. St Francis belongs to the Church and can provide a means whereby the Church can go some way towards overcoming contemporary agnosticism by showing how it is possible to believe in Jesus Christ without becoming less human and less involved in the working out of the common destiny of man.

- 1 Unless otherwise stated all quotations are taken from Marion A. Habig, OFM ed. *St Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973).
- 2 For a more comprehensive study of the centrality of Christ see: Michael D. Meilach, OFM, *The Primacy of Christ in Doctrine and Life*, (Franciscan Herald Press, sa[1964]) and the revised version published under the title: *From Order to Omega*, (F.H.P. sa[1967]).
- 3 C. Esser OFM, *The Order of St Francis*, (F.H.P. 1974 (1959) 26.
- 4 ICelano 37 and 84; IICelano 24. *Omnibus*, 259, 299, 382.
- 5 Testament of St Clare, 2. in I. Brady, OFM, *The Legend and Writings of Saint Clare of Assisi*, (The Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure N.Y. 1953) 82.
- 6 St Bonaventure, *Major Life*, X.7. *Omnibus*, 710-711.
- 7 Bartholomew of Pisa, *Liber de Conformitate ... in Analecta Franciscana* V, 354, 430.
- 8 St Bonaventure, *Major Life*, XIII. 5. *Omnibus*, 732.
- 9 St Bonaventure, *Major Life*, IV. 3. *Omnibus*, 655.
- 10 Some of the thoughts which appear in this section first appeared in a letter I wrote to *The Tablet* 25 November 1978. p 1046.
- 11 *Omnibus*, 96.
- 12 2 Celano 172. *Omnibus*, 500.
- 13 *Mirror of Perfection* 115. *Omnibus*, 1254.
- 14 Rule 1222, Ch. 22, Cf. D. Flood, OFM and T. Matura, OFM, *The Birth of a Movement – A Study on the First Rule of St Francis*, trans. by P. Schwartz OFM and P. Lachance OFM, (F.H.P. sa[1975]) 99.
- 15 *Omnibus*, 96. and *Admonition V*, *Omnibus*, 80.
- 16 *Omnibus*, 68.
- 17 Here I have made use of some thoughts I expressed in *TAU* a Franciscan spiritual review published by the Indian Vicariate, Vol. 4 No 1 (April 1979) 4-8 though I have made some substantial changes and added further insights.

- 18 *Letter to a General Chapter*, in *Omnibus*, 104.
- 19 *Letter to a General Chapter*, in *Omnibus*, 105-106; *First Rule*, 23, Cf. *The Birth of a Movement*, 103.
- 20 St Bonaventure, *Major Life*, II.5. *Omnibus*, 643.
- 21 *Admonition I*, *Omnibus*, 78.
- 22 St Bonaventure, *Major Life*, XI. 1. *Omnibus*, 711-712.
- 23 Cf. C. Esser, OFM and E. Grau, OFM, *Love's Reply*; trans. by I. Brady, OFM, (Franciscan Herald Press sa[1963] esp. Ch. 11; also *ICelano* 89. *Omnibus*, 304.
- 24 Cf. Y. Congar, OP, *Faith and the spiritual Life*, (London sa[1969]) 43-44.
- 25 *Testament*, *Omnibus*, 68; and *Legend of the Three Companions* XII, 46. *Omnibus*, 932.
- 26 For example: Auspicius van Corstanje, *The Covenant with God's Poor*, (Chicago: F.H.P. 1966) especially ch 5. Also: Duane V. Lapsanski, *The Mission of St Francis within Salvation History*, in *The Cord* Vol 26 No 11 (December 1976) 351-356.
- 27 *Testament*. *Omnibus*, 67 *ICelano* 62. *Omnibus*, 280.
- 28 *ICelano* 115. *Omnibus*, 487.

Rahner's *Grundkurs* revisited once again

Fergus Kerr O P

Karl Rahner writes as follows (*Foundations of Christian Faith*, page 431): "In view of the mode in which eschatological statements are made in the Old and New Testaments, a Christian is always tempted to read and to interpret the eschatological statements of Christianity as anticipatory eyewitness accounts of a future which is still outstanding". The meaning of this sentence, according to Hugo Meynell (*New Blackfriars*, July/August 1980, page 348), is that Rahner is warning us against the temptation of thinking that eschatological statements tell us anything, or have any bearing upon, what is to happen to us when we die: "Perhaps it is stupid of me not to be able to see what is being denied here, unless it is that Christians have some kind of expectation for the future after the end of the present life". Dr Meynell thus reads the sentence as if it were stressed as follows: "In view of the mode in which eschatological statements are made in the Old and New Testaments, a Christian is always tempted to read and to interpret the eschatological statements of Christianity as anticipatory eye-