The Cord, 56.1 (2006)

A Lonergan View of Francis of Assisi On Consciousness, Conversion and Communication

Richard L. Boileau

Introduction

The radical decision that Francis of Assisi took with regards to the meaning of the Christian Gospel during the opening moments of the thirteenth century created a whole school of spirituality that has transcended the centuries as "the richest of all, incontestably one of the most beautiful, and one which has most decisively left its stamp on the history of the Church."[1] Few within the Christian tradition, other than Jesus himself, have been the subject of as much speculation as Francis of Assisi; more books and articles have been published about him that any other figure in Christian history.[2] No one has been more closely associated with Jesus: "It seems . . . that there was never anyone . . . who resembled more the image of Jesus Christ and the evangelical form of life than Francis."[3] No one has had a larger spiritual family: grouped as Friars Minor, Poor Clares and Secular Franciscans and Third Order Regular religious, they have made up the largest religious movement in the history of Christianity.

For those of us who are so inclined, appropriating this tradition and allowing it to change our lives is important, but it is not enough. We are invited to "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15), but also we are called to spread the good news of salvation (cf. Rm. 10:14). Francis gave us the foundation and the tools for doing so efficiently and effectively: "Already at an early date, Pope Honorius III pays tribute to the Friars Minor in that "everywhere, *after the example of the Apostles*, 'they spread abroad the seed of the word of God.'"[4] I believe that Francis's legacy still has much to teach us about the communication of gospel values. Whereas the monastic tradition had focused on seeking God, the mendicant movement had as its prime intuition the need to propose to the wider world the Good News of Jesus Christ.

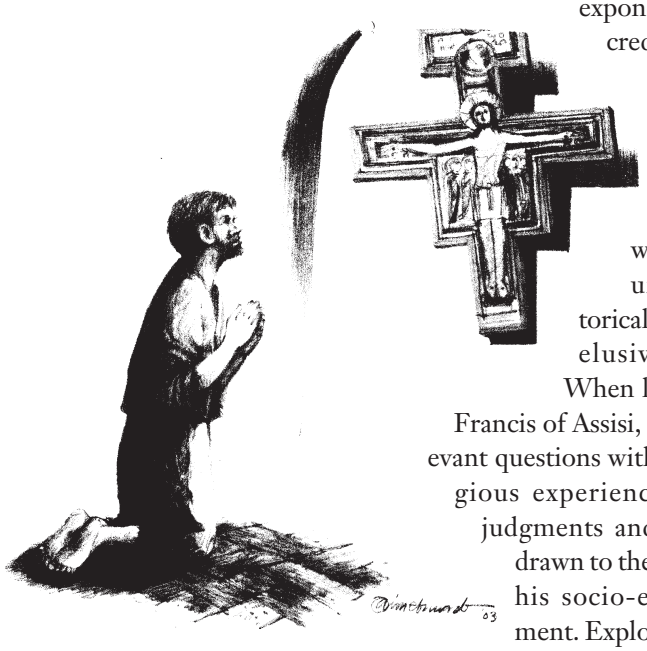
To understand the effects of this movement requires familiarity with the culture in which Francis operated. He lived in changing times, as we do today, and his genius was to interpret the traditional elements in his surroundings in a new way.

> The word "new" recurs frequently in the comments of early observers of the Franciscan movement. Francis himself seemed to many in his day a new kind of Christian, one that did not fit easily within the categories of his day . . . creating a new "form of life," as he called it, different from the prevailing monastic and canonical forms then in favor.[5]

Vernon Gregson, a Lonergan scholar, has highlighted the ways in which great teachers, such as Buddha, Jesus, Confucius and Mohamed introduce newness (to which I would add the name of Francis despite the fact that the *poverello* would surely protest).

> First, these great teachers were originators of meaning and values [and] the past became "new" to their visions. They did not give new answers. They raised new questions. . . .Second, most of what they taught was in the form of stories or parables, which are particularly effective and striking ways to reveal values, their principle concern. Their interest, then, was not primarily discursive truth. . . .Third, their own lives were the best narratives, the best stories to reveal the depth of their own characters and to give evidence of the goodness, the beauty, and the rightness of what they stood for.[6]

As I have come to know him better for who he must really have been–historically, stripped of devotional clichés–my respect for Francis has grown exponentially. Most of the credit for this belongs to the eminent Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan, whose method exposes the need, as well as the tools, for understanding historically even something as elusive as spirituality. When looking at the life of Francis of Assisi, in asking all the relevant questions with regards to his religious experience, understanding, judgments and decisions, we are drawn to the changing aspects of his socio-economic environment. Exploring what Lonergan



meant by intellectual, moral and religious conversion, one relates this progressive process to Francis's manifest commitment to continuous conversion as the *sine qua non* of religious life. Finally, when one asks questions about his spirituality in relation to the functional specialties proposed by Lonergan, it is a relatively simple matter to attribute insightful moments of Francis's life to the operation of each specialty running from his unique experience of religious life and teaching; to his resolution of conflicts and contradictions, and the subsequent change in his foundational convictions; to his communication of this experience and understanding by word and action.

Lonergan's "Transcendental" Method

The term "transcendental" is applied because of the progressive nature of this process: a system of striving for higher levels of consciousness, "a mounting from a fixation with the world of immediacy to the world filled with meaning and permeated with value. It has to do with the struggle toward the authentic human functioning identified with knowledge and choice."[7] Of particular importance in understanding Lonergan's method is how he perceived consciousness or intentionality. It is to this that Lonergan related the eight functional specialties that he saw as comprising the work not only of theology but of other disciplines as well.

Lonergan thought of human beings as coming to know through progressive levels of consciousness. The first level is experience to which he urged us to be attentive. Upon this basic human activity rests the entire process leading to real self-actualization. On this level are situated the sensory operations as well as remembering and imagining. The second level is understanding, which requires us to be intelligent in the operation of inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving and formulating.[8] The third level is judging for which being reasonable is the operative precept as one reflects and determines the sufficiency of evidence: "reflecting, marshalling and weighing the evidence, judging."[9] The fourth level of consciousness is deciding, which demands that we be responsible in the choices we make and in the actions we undertake to breathe life into our decisions: "deliberating, evaluating, deciding, speaking, writing."[10] The apex of this ascent is mystery, the state of being in love: "We fall in love. And it need not always be preceded by knowledge, especially when our falling in love is initiated by, and has as its term, a Transcendent Mystery that we do not and cannot apprehend."[11]

The following table illustrates the relationship between the eight functional specialties and the four levels of consciousness or intentionality, and previews the manner in which these can be applied to Francis of Assisi's religious insights.

Lonergan's Cognitive Process Applied to Francis of Assisi *(To be read from bottom left, up and across, then down to bottom right)*		
Functional Specialties	**Levels of Consciousness or Intentionality**	**Functional Specialties**
Appropriating a Tradition (Meaning of the Gospel)		*Mediating between Tradition and Contemporary Culture*
4. Dialectics ➔ *Conflict leading to conversion*	*Fourth:* Deciding Responsibly	5. Foundations 🡻 *Development of form of life*
3. History *Discernment within church*	*Third:* Judging Rationally	6. Doctrine *His new priorities*
2. Interpretation *Culture affecting his knowing*	*Second*: Understanding Reasonably	7. Systematics *His early rule and admonitions*
1. Research *His experience* 🡹 *of religion*	*First*: Experiencing Attentively	8. Communication *His Testament*

Lonergan's method is not so much a cognitional theory but a concrete charting of the data of consciousness itself. It is "concerned with objectifying the human subject's actual cognitional process."[12] Being alert to one's own cognitional process is what Lonergan called "self-appropriation"[13] and it is not the same as looking at oneself as one would a specimen in a laboratory but must be done in context of a living experience. Consequently, objectivity for Lonergan was in effect critical and transparent subjectivity.

Finally, a few words about "intersubjectivity," the understanding of which reveals how truly gifted a communicator Francis was: "Meaning is embodied or carried in human intersubjectivity, in art, in symbols, in language, and in the lives and deeds of persons. . . .Prior to the 'we' that results from the mutual love of an 'I' and a 'thou', there is the earlier 'we' . . . ."[4] From it wells up a deep desire to break free of self-preoccupation and to find meaning in a broader reality or higher level of consciousness. Thomas Farrell has suggested, "advanced writing is intersubjective, because writers draw on meanings, and values they have received from others."[15] By acting attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly, and in love, therefore, the communicator of religious value assists in the progress and development of society because within him intersubjectivity collaborates with authenticity to create new horizons of understanding and new categories of meaning.

> The genesis of common meaning is an ongoing process of communication, of people coming to share the same cognitive, constitutive, and effective meanings. On the elementary level this process has been described as arising between the self and the other when, on the basis of already existing intersubjectivity, the self makes a gesture, the other makes an interpretive response, and the self discovers in the response the effective meaning of his gesture. So from intersubjectivity through gesture and interpretations there arises common understanding. On that spontaneous basis there can be built a common language, the transmission of acquired knowledge and of social patterns through education, the diffusion of information, and the common will to community that seeks to replace misunderstanding with mutual comprehension and to change occasions of disagreement into occasions of non-agreement and eventually agreement.[16]

What Lonergan implied is that all good theology goes through these stages of consciousness and the functional steps or specialties that rest upon them–whatever we chose to call these levels and steps. Any endeavor, therefore, that is either inauthentic (e.g., interpretation of data without adequate consideration of biases) or incomplete (e.g., skipping from doctrine to communication) must be regarded as inherently flawed. It is my belief that any investigation of Franciscan spirituality or, in particular, of the communication of Franciscan spirituality, must take this process into account.

Francis's Experience of Religion

According to Lonergan, research is the awareness of experience and the unavoidable first step in a rigorous pursuit of meaning. It is the most basic level of knowing and the conscious or intentional state of being attentive to what is occurring around and within us. Not only are sensory details important, so also is the thoughtful consideration of how our own mind works. This is the only way to counter bias and other distortions that creep into our attempts to know and understand. Awareness of how we process data is just as vital as our consideration of the data being processed: "It is central to Lonergan's thought that the data of consciousness, or how the human mind works, be part of the theologian's "data" as he or she goes about theological research in the data available to the senses through reading and personal experience."[17]

In his Testament, Francis would clearly identify the Gospel as the inspiration for his form of life, so it is fair to assume that his experience of it had a significant affect on him. There is no way of knowing what its influence was prior to his commitment to follow Christ in strict fidelity to what he found in the Gospel, but it is evident from his various writings that he was deeply marked by numerous passages that convey the words and actions of Jesus. This is all

the more remarkable when we consider that it is unlikely he ever read or even consulted the Gospel the way we do today, with the whole Bible or New Testament in one bound edition. What he spoke from was probably his recollection of pericopes proclaimed in the liturgies that he attended. It was only in churches that he would have had access to full biblical texts. Manselli, for instance, echoed the popular belief that it was in a church that Francis and his first companions used the officially proscribed practice to discern the will of God for the nascent order by randomly opening the Gospel three times, each time revealing a verse about the nature of discipleship and the call to evangelical poverty. But it was his keen observation and his near-perfect memory regarding the details of incidents and quotations recounted in Gospel narratives that seems so awesome to us today. His citation of them was extensive and his insight into their meaning was many times innovative. For reasons that are not entirely clear, Francis's attention focused explicitly upon the Gospel. Perhaps he did have access to books but that these contained only the four Gospel accounts, or perhaps it was his intuition to resolve the confusion created by different styles of religious behavior prevalent in his time. For whatever reason, he would eventually choose to follow the example of Jesus rather than that of the apostles, a decision that would have surprisingly dramatic consequences.

Another experience that would change the course of Francis's life was the fact that he charismatically attracted others to join him in the hope of sharing his new from of life. First there were few, among them the wealthy Bernard of Quintavalle, the priest Peter Catanii, and later Clare, born in nobility. Soon there would be many: "Not only were men converted to the Order; but also many virgins and widows, struck by their preaching, on their advice, secluded themselves in cities and towns in monaseries established for doing penance."[18] From every indication, recruiting others to join him and providing leadership to hundreds and then thousands of followers was certainly not part of his original plan. It figuratively sent him back to the drawing board. For this reason, there are few landmark moments in Francis's experience of the Gospel as weighty as his hearing of Christ's call to preaching in the Gospel of Matthew:

> Go and preach, "The Kingdom of Heaven is near!" Heal the sick, bring the dead back to life, heal those who suffer from dreaded skin-diseases, and drive out demons. You have received without paying, so give without being paid. Do not carry any gold, silver or copper money in your pockets; do not carry a beggar's bag for the journey or an extra shirt of a stick. A worker should be given what he needs (Mt 10: 7-10).

Even as Francis lived and preached the Gospel, his own communication of its central events became experiences that precipitated further developments

in his spirituality. Perhaps the best example of this is his re-enactment of the Nativity scene at Greccio, cradled in the Rieti valley south of Assisi. The year 1223 was a difficult year for Francis. There were considerable tensions within the brotherhood, principally between those who would live according to the precepts of evangelical poverty as Francis explained them and those who would adopt a style of living more consistent with the prevalent monastic model of the times. As he returned from Rome, where he had met Church officials to consider the revisions recommended by the curia (an event some would agree weighed heavily upon his spirit), he stopped to visit an old friend, John, a man of good reputation and means. He asked his friend to organize a Christmas liturgy to illustrate the poverty and simplicity of the Incarnation. What he caused, almost certainly without intending to do so, was the beginning of the now-familiar tradition of constructing nativity scenes in our homes and churches around the world. What he observed was a concrete manifestation of what it meant for Christ to enter human history, and that experience filled him with inexpressible joy and consolation. Christmas at Greccio was a living out of Francis's fixation on the humanity and divinity of Jesus in the context of his relations with Mary and Joseph as evidenced in the Gospel, which he viewed as more fundamental than the life of the apostles after the death of Christ as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. If the reenactment of Christ's birth was a key milestone experience in the completion of his spirituality, the stigmata which recalled his beloved Lord's passion and death, and which occurred on Mount La Verna, in Tuscany, not quite a year later, was an event of corresponding magnitude: "On September 14, 1224, while Francis was immersed in a long period of prayer, he received the stigmata, which he carried until his death."[19]

In the course of shaping his spirituality into a final rule of life that could be shared by his brotherhood, Francis was also greatly influenced by his experience of the Gospel as interpreted in the wide-sweeping ecclesial reform of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and subsequent papal bulls. The magnitude of this event, which addressed burning concerns such as "various heresies, growing disrespect for the church and its leaders and minister, the reform of the church's episcopacy and priests, the reform of Eucharistic practice, and the initiation of a new crusade to the Near East,"[20] calls to our minds Vatican II, which in turn allows us to imagine how deeply Francis must have been moved by this watershed event.

Often portrayed as a romantic dreamer, Francis was actually a pragmatic man who never ventured very far from the need to find concrete answers to life's primordial questions by using the materials found in his immediate environment. His spirituality was not spawned by highly evolved theological principles; rather he "felt that the starting point of his conversion and reversal of

values was his realization of the existential fact of the human condition as common to each person, and that over each person loomed the possibility of an identical fate."[21]

Evidence suggests that he was extremely observant and attentive to the minutest details of his surroundings. He was a person who based much of his understanding about the central issues of life as well as his judgments about their relative importance and his decisions about how to integrate these into his own life on the most basic of materials: his own observations and experiences, his own data of sense and of consciousness. Ironically, the man who tradition would receive as an eccentric dreamer was in effect a practical man, bold and perseverant, but with a poet's sensibility for deriving meaning from data that others would overlook and an idealist's audacity for daring to live authentically according to the insights that these would yield, no matter the cost.

Francis's careful attention to his own experience of religion can be regarded as consciousness at the most basic level, in regards to the categories elucidated by Lonergan. He would then interpret this awareness as understanding that would later open onto new and exciting possibilities and serve as the solid ground upon which would be constructed a form of life to which others would soon be drawn.

Francis as Communicator

Lonergan's method is an invaluable tool to appreciate the manner and content of the poverello's communications of his religious experience. Anyone wishing to communicate the spiritual insights of this thirteenth-century Italian penitent would benefit from a process similar to one proposed by Lonergan to avoid misleading biases and unhelpful superficialities; to reveal the richness of who he was and what he did; and to do so in a manner that will have a positive impact on our culture and the development of spiritual theology.

Following are a few conclusions about the communication of Franciscan spirituality, both in Francis's time and in our own.

1. Though this is indeed an extreme case of stating the obvious, I think it is important to begin with the observation that Francis was a sincere, intelligent and successful communicator. The evidence we have for this is quite simply the durability of its form and content, and the constantly renewed and re-invigorated interest it has elicited for the past 800 years.

2. Without distracting from the previous point, I think it is equally obvious that there is an urgent need to clarify, redirect or amplify–perhaps a combination of all three–the signal that we have received in order that it be made fully relevant and useful for our times. Mindless imitation of his life

would be unwise, unsatisfying and unhelpful to others. Consequently, there is a need to demythologize it, not to lay it bare and render it barren, but in order to re-mythologize it in exciting and contemporary ways so that its vital truths may echo across our culture and continue to convey meaning and value well into the future.

3. The essence of his legacy is still fertile ground for the development of spiritual theology that bears fruit needed to nourish people of the 21st century. It also serves as a solid and splendid foundation upon which we can ground reasonable decisions about how our own lives can be evidence of Gospel values transcending the limits of time and space to save us from devastating effects of these barriers to conversion.

4. It would seem to be appropriate to apply to the communication of Franciscan spirituality the best practices of secular communications, provided these were consistent with the charism of the poverello, particularly in his openness to what is from God, gift or desire, even as these are oftentimes unplanned and unexpected. Today, we have a broader array of media available to us as well as a deeper understanding than Francis had of how even traditional communication operates. In thirty years of journalism, corporate communications and the study of communication theory, I have become aware of numerous principles and practices that enable people to achieve increased levels of authenticity and efficacy in reaching disparate audiences with key and vital messages. I have no doubt that the learning I have achieved in the secular arena can now be harnessed at the service of a particularly Franciscan understanding of spirituality for the benefit of those for whom it would have resonance. It would be appropriate, therefore, if not imperative, to apply to Franciscan communication aimed at the highly secularized citizens of this new millennium Lonergan's insights in communication, these being very consistent with those of Francis, as I have suggested in previous units. The outcome promises, I believe, to support the church's hopes for a new era of evangelization.

5. Perhaps the most compelling aspects of Francis's religious reality, one that echoes in our own, is the balance he struck between being authentically faithful to the meaning of the Gospel, as he understood it, and fidelity to the official teachings of the church, as witnessed by his wholesale inclusion of council decrees and canons in his own writings. I am reminded of the parallels that exist between this simple and sincere post-conciliar person who prayed and preached in the shadows of both heretical and church-led reform movements and us, who dwell, worship and act in the shadow of individualism, pluralism and various church reforms.

6. Returning to Lonergan as the lens through which we have formed a fuller appreciation of how Francis communicated his spirituality, we can also

get a glimpse of how we can more effectively communicate the tradition of Franciscan spirituality available to us today by drawing certain opportunities for further development. Three areas are particularly promising: writing, preaching and the use of symbols.

7. Lonergan rested much of his presentation of communication on the principle of intersubjectivity, which is a very elemental reality about how human beings related to one another: "Subjects are mutually and reciprocally aware."[22] Writing must be regarded as intersubjectivity because "the image of writing as intersubjectivity clearly suggests that the writer needs to appropriate commonly known ideas from within the various textual communities . . . in order to be able to write effectively."[23] Farrell suggested that "advanced writing is inter-subjectivity, because writers draw on meanings and values they have received from others."[24] The conclusion for us is that good writing on any subject, including the communication of spirituality, requires that the writer apply to rigorously selected source material Lonergan's due diligence tests of good research, interpretation, judgment and decision with attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility: "According to Lonergan, meanings and values 'are authentic in the measure that cumulatively they are the result of transcendental precepts.'"[25]

8. To be effective, preaching about spiritual matters must be regarded as a form, albeit distinct, of theological communication and not just a disincarnated inventory of doctrinal statements: "It is an articulation not only of the meaning to be conveyed, but of the value of that meaning for changing both the preacher and those who might hear the preaching."[26] When a person religiously in love engages in the distinct form of communication known as preaching, we have an example of an oral evaluative hermeneutic in action. A text is being interpreted not only as to its meaning, but also to its value to transform human life. . . .As a form of theological communication, preaching can bring a good word that not only calls for compassion but for justice. In hope, the religions and cultures of our world wait.[27]

9. Finally, to be efficacious, our plan to communicate must make judicious use of symbols to faithfully convey rather than distort meaning. Too often traditional symbols are misrepresented, misused or misunderstood, particularly when they have long-since lost their capacity to bear meaning in cultural circumstances remote from those in which they were first conceived. Clearly, this problem is ubiquitous, insidious and intractable simply because "the communication of the Christian vision resides most centrally in its symbols as expressed in its sacred texts. Yet these symbols are not transparent. They require both the critical examination of their meaning in the first century and the critical understanding of them in the 20th century."[28]

Catholic theology in particular has begun a thorough examination of itself in relation to culture: past, present, and especially the future. At the same time, theology has recognized that it cannot concern itself exclusively with ecclesial problems, especially those embedded in cultural contexts of the limiting past, at the expense of the rest of the world. Theology has a wider, inclusive reasonability for cultural problems as a new challenge.[29]

The aim of the study that I conducted was to search in the writings of Francis of Assisi and those of biographers and historians for the best indicators of how Franciscan spirituality was communicated in the first years of the movement. This investigation employed Lonergan's transcendental method to interpret evidence found in early documents and contemporary academic literature in order to make reasonable judgments about how we are to receive this rich tradition in a manner that allows us to communicate Franciscan spirituality authentically in our own culture. Our point of departure must, of course, be with Jesus, just as it was for Francis: "For Jesus, the disposition of genuine repentance was only possible when one took on the attitude of a child (Mt 18:3) and turned away from the dispositions of self-righteousness and presumption (Lk 18:10-14). The repentance that Jesus preached was good news to be received with joy."[30] If continuous conversion, therefore, was at the heart of the spiritual life of Saint Francis, it must be so for anyone wishing to communicate his spirituality in our own culture. Indeed, conversion, as understood in the method of Lonergan, is by definition something to which we must remain disposed at all times, and it must be an authentic expression of decisions to change and progress, a transformation which begins with a religious experience, to which we are attentive, understood by being intelligent, judged by being reasonable, and acted upon by being responsible.

There are numerous parallels between the age in which Francis operated and our own. Not the least of these is the need to make a clear and deliberate choice between the secular forces of hedonism or humanism and the spiritual need to live according to tenets of the faith we profess.[31] In our time as well as that in which Francis consciously sought to reconcile paradoxes and to find meaning in the midst of contradictory signs, we are called to respond to God's love through penance: "Francis and Clare experienced different events in their lives which led them into this practice, but they agreed upon the core values of penance: following Jesus in humility, poverty, simplicity, and community."[32] Indeed, all Christians are called to make sober judgments and coherent decisions about the meaning of the Gospel, and to take responsible and loving action that is suited to our own particular circumstances. We all are called to consciousness in faith, to conversion in hope, and to self-transcendence in Love.

"Let Us Begin . . ."

Evidently, Francis's communication of his spirituality has been a resounding success. Eight hundred years after he walked the dusty roads of Italy and neighboring countries, roughly clad and lacking in all things save for the virtues of faith, hope, love, and the qualities of peace, joy and compassion, we still speak of this fun-loving romantic who would become a self-effacing man of God, thrust onto the world stage by a series of disturbing insights and the conflicted circumstances that surrounded them. His charism has been celebrated and condemned. He himself has been imitated and ridiculed. Still, his communication of meaning endures.

We can learn something about what is lasting about his legacy by examining what people say and write about it today. Warner recalled our traditional association of Francis with peacemaking, preaching by example, the brotherhood of creation and the balance between prayer and action. Short pointed to the continuing relevance of these insights: the "down-to-earthness" of the experience of God; the real meaning of evangelical poverty; the spirituality of creation; and the spirituality of reconciliation. And Brunette posited that Francis's "state of spiritual itinerancy"[33] serves as a powerful inspiration or compass if not an actual road map for our own life's journey of conversion.

Anyone undertaking the task of communicating these spiritual insights must first grapple with two questions. The first is whether or not it is important to do so. It is my conviction that it is. In part, this conviction is based upon the following appreciation of the similarities that exist between his age and our own, notwithstanding the vast differences in our respective social, political and ecclesial environments. The second is this: Was Francis's way of looking at things compatible with our own?

In order to answer the first question, it is helpful to recall these similarities.

	Francis's Times	**Our Times**
Cry for peace	War with neighboring cities War between church and state War between Islam and Christianity	Strife between rich and poor countries Conflict between church and state Tension between Islam and Christianity

	Francis's Times	Our Times
Relationship to creation	Disregard for welfare of vassals Unawareness of ecology People and nature were mere resources	Disregard for welfare of employees Neglect and abuse of ecosystems Devaluation of human and natural capital
Quest for simplicity	Struggle to survive Constant fear of disease and violence People locked into social structures	Rampant and growing stress at work Growing fear of brutal economic forces Social alienation of individuals
Church reform	Ubiquitous heretical groups Monumental impact of Lateran IV Concern about control of *magisterium*	Growing concerns about orthodoxy Monumental impact of Vatican II Concern about control of *magisterium*

Relationship with Creation

When Pope John Paul II declared Francis of Assisi to be the patron saint of ecology, I doubt that anyone was surprised. His Canticle of Creation alone would have earned him that accolade. On the surface, it appears rustic and naive, but "when it is seen in terms of Francis's other works and the motivation behind its composition, the poem in fact acquires indisputable claim to originality and complexity."[34]

> Creatures, each having autonomous worth and beauty, are yet brothers and sisters to each other, aiding each other, gladly performing their divinely allotted functions. . . .By giving creatures their due praise, people overcome their customary callous ingratitude to creatures and to God–another step toward the reconciliation and redemption of humanity envisioned by the end of the poem.[35]

Francis tied all things together into a single integrated worldview, which encompassed God, humankind and all things great and small created by God's

own hand. He understood the intended connectedness, so it would not be surprising to find a prominent liberation theologian eight centuries later writing a book linking the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. As Boff has written:

> The world and its creatures are within the human being in the form of the archetypes, symbols, and images that inhabit our interiority and with which we must dialog and that we must integrate. If violence persists in the relationships of human beings with nature, it is because aggressive impulses emerge from within human beings. These impulses indicate the lack of an inner ecology and a failure to integrate the three main directions of ecology . . . : environmental ecology, social ecology, and mental ecology.[36]

Cry for Peace

Scarcely anyone feels immune from conflict. As anxiety grows about the nature and frequency of distrust and disputes, as aggressive behavior and armed struggles intensify, people dream of peace. Sadly, some have already lost the ability to even dream of such a possibility, so the need for peacemakers is as manifest today as it was in Francis's time: people who bring reconciliation and healing to individuals, families, nations and the world. Peace was for him a subject of capital importance. His rule bade brothers to say upon entering someone's home, "Peace be to this house" and on his deathbed he said to them, "Go dearest brothers, two by two into all the country, and preach to men peace and penance unto the remission of their sins."[37] His method was predicated on a profound understanding of brotherhood and sisterhood, which implies true love of all created things, and respect for the inherent dignity of all of God's children. It implied a willingness to see all things as gift from a benevolent and providential God and to let go of the fear that causes us to hoard as though these possessions had the power to protect us from the real dangers in life. And, it implied the dismantling of barriers that block out the light more than they do the enemy.

Today, the charism of peacemaker is understood to take on three important forms. The first is to facilitate genuine dialogue. History would suggest that this is more difficult than it seems. Perhaps Francis would have observed that this is so because to engage in meaningful dialogue, one must pre-suppose that the dialogue partner is a brother or sister, equal in the eyes of God, with the capacity to be an instrument of his will and the capability of acting with divine grace. This is why Francis's notion of brotherhood is so fundamental to the building up of a world order crowned by peace: the kingdom of God on earth. The second modern strategy for peace is the promotion of justice. Francis

understood that to achieve peace, certain conditions had to be met. While the so-called *Prayer of Saint Francis* was not actually written by the *poverello*, it is generally regarded as being aptly steeped in his spirituality: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. . . .For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned. . . ."[38] Reflecting on the tradition surrounding that prayer, Boff recalled a principle that "comes from Saint Augustine: peace is the work of justice. . . .[P]eace cannot be sought by itself without first achieving justice . . . .Justice is giving to each one his or her due."[39]

> Today social justice represents one of the most serious challenges to the conscience of the world. The abyss between those who are within the world "order" and those who are excluded is widening day by day . . . .[W]e are living in times of grave disequilibrium, of real war declared against the Earth, against ecosystems which are plundered, against people who are shunted aside because world capital is no longer interested in exploring them, against whole classes of workers who are made expendable and excluded; war against two-thirds of humankind who do not have the basic goods they need to live in peace.[40]

Finally, the third enabler of peace is social and economic development, a role that Francis actively assumed, particularly privileging the poor.

On one hand, Francis can be offered as the exemplar of all three strategies. He showed by example what it means to enter into meaningful dialogue with a Moslem sultan; he advocated on behalf of those who were exploited and oppressed; and he worked alongside the poor in order that their situation might be improved, if only modestly. Clearly tradition has caused us to receive Francis not only as a lover of peace but also as a maker of peace. Cook recalled that various episodes in his life point to that fact: Francis and Masseo stressing that friars must see the importance of peace while on the road to Siena in the *Fioretti*; driving out demons in Arezzo in accounts by Celano and Bonaventure as well as the Legend of Perugia; restoring peace in Bologna as in the writings of Thomas, archdeacon of Spoleto; and, at the end of his life, reconciling the *podesta* and the bishop in Assisi itself,[41] [and] according to the Legend of Perugia: "Francis is not only a lover of peace–he was a maker of peace. He did not concern himself only with preaching the peace which should penetrate the hearts of all men; he set out to create an end to war without which his goal of bringing salvation would have been largely unachieved."[42] On the other hand, we must be cautious in our portrayal of Francis as an ideal peacemaker, particularly as we look for lessons relevant to our own circumstances. Joseph P. Chinnici has presented a persuasive argument to suggest that this misrepresents historic facts about what Francis did and the spirit in which he did things:

"Inasmuch as we make of Francis an ideal and the peace he incarnated an ideal peace, we rob him of his history and ourselves of our freedom to act."[43] Rather, Francis offered peace as bread "to a war-torn, hungry world,"[44] showing many ways to witness to peace:

> Martyrdom is a central motif in early Franciscan writing: Some are martyred in Morocco; some, like Giles, embrace what he calls the "martyrdom of contemplation"; some, like Francis and Bonaventure, are martyred in community; some like Clare receive the martyrdom of illness and struggle within the Church; others, by creative word in the world. All are martyred in the cause of peace, searching dominantly for the presence of Christ and a way to make that presence effective.[45]

Quest for Simplicity

Despite growing public interest in matters of religion and spirituality, a phenomenon often heralded under the banner of post-modern values, it must be recognized that we live in a very materialistic world. The acquisitive and clinging tendency that seems to fuel an insatiable appetite for power and possessions creates remarkable anxiety in our lives and provokes us to assume roles and adopt behaviors that sink us into ever-increasing depths of stress. This was also true in Francis's day, albeit manifest in different forms. His spirituality, however, provided relief from the anguish of unnatural ambitions: evangelical poverty was the antidote that he prescribed. While the challenge that this spirituality poses is daunting, for which reason we are often inclined to dismiss it, it is as relevant to us today as it was to him in his day. He would have been no more eager to part with property than we would be. But it was the price that he was prepared to pay for the freedom to follow Christ rather than the ways of the world.

> Following this example, living *sine proprio*, without anything of one's own, today implies the refusal to arrogate to one's self what belongs to all, because all belongs to the Creator. Everything is gift; nothing is "property." The gospel mandate to "sell all and give to the poor," which Francis and Clare followed, far from being meaningless, is as urgent in our own day as it was in theirs."[46]

But evangelical poverty was for the *poverello* and must be for us today understood to be the means and not the end of a courageous spiritual journey focused on union with Jesus Crucified: "Poverty is never lived for its own sake, but always for the . . . life of the Sprit, that it brings to the world. . . .The viable reforms always made specific expressions of poverty secondary to renewal of

gospel service to the poor and union with Jesus in contemplative prayer."[47] It is for this reason that we are more inclined to shift our attention from evangelical poverty, which is a value too easily misunderstood and misrepresented, to humility and simplicity.

Church Reform

We live, as Francis did, in an age when divergent opinions regarding the way in which we are called to witness to gospel values in our daily lives are confronted to one another as soldiers pitted against one another on a battlefield. It seems that at such a time, his response to this tendency is becoming increasingly worthy of our attention. Francis saw in his day those who would imitate Jesus concretely as well as those who would adapt his ways, perhaps more symbolically. Francis saw those who chose a direct route to God as well as those who would place more emphasis on structures and intermediaries as the road to salvation. He witnessed trends that encouraged heterogeneity and others than stressed the need for orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

These trends are still with us today and the divisions between people and communities continue to widen. Perhaps it is no wonder that we are so attracted to a gentle figure that manifestly sought the presence of the Holy Spirit in otherness; who held deep-seated convictions but, in a genuine sense of spiritual poverty, sought to humbly apply them to his own life rather than bitterly reproach those with whom he would not agree. He truly regarded himself as the greatest sinner of all, yet a brother to all. This attitude saved him from spiritual pride and others from the toxic words and behavior that self-righteousness inevitably spews.

The second question facing us before deciding on a course of action to communicate Francis's spiritual insights to our own culture in the manner that Lonergan would appreciate is this one: Was Francis's way of looking at things compatible with our own? Certainly he was not a critical realist in the fullest sense of that expression–nor could he have been. But relative to the context in which we must situate him, it may be said that he was naturally disposed to such an outlook. His struggle with religious questions was chiefly caused by his determination to be authentic. Can we today authentically appropriate and effectively communicate his spirituality without such an attitude? I suggest that we cannot. It would be folly to simplistically imitate someone from so foreign a culture. Yet it would be equally foolish to disregard his insights and the stunning parallels that exist between his socio-political and ecclesial environment and our own. It would be, I think, regrettable to set aside a tradition that carries with it a unique capacity to help us understand the desire that dwells within each of us, namely to find ultimate meaning and to fall in love.

The challenge is to communicate these insights with language that resonates for people today, particularly those who are unfamiliar with the expressions and even the categories of traditional religious discourse and the rituals of its celebration and worship. It is also to use the stories of Francis's life in new ways to engender passion in faith and compassion in love. It is finally to leverage genuine conversion, as Lonergan understood the term, in the hearts, minds and souls of God's people. These challenges call us to be creative in the way we present Francis, always mindful of the adaptations required, and always recalling that Francis communicated by his life more than by his words . . . as Jesus had done. While Francis's form of theology can be described as "archaic," his spirituality is timeless because it continues to "elicit our wonder and to inspire our feeble attempts to follow (him) in his dedication to the '*vita evangelii Jesu Christi*.'"[48]

Endnotes

[1]Martial Lekeux, "Franciscan Mysticism" in William J. Short, *Poverty and Joy: The Franciscan Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 17.

[2]"According to the Smithsonian bibliography, more lives have been written of him that of any other person." Richard Rohr, *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001), 109.

[3]Pope Pius IX, Encyclical "*Rite Expiatis*" quoted by Pope Paul VI in the preamble to the revised Rule for Secular Franciscans promulgated in 1978. *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979), 2.

[4]"*Cum dilecti filii* (June 11, 1219), I, 2b" in Cajetan Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970), 218.

[5]William J. Short, *Poverty and Joy: The Franciscan Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 21.

[6]Vernon Gregson, *The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 95.

[7]Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 282.

[8]Lonergan, 6.

[9]Lonergan, 6.

[10]Lonergan, 6.

[11]Robert M. Doran, "Foreword: Common Ground," *Communication and Lonergan: Common Ground for Forging the New Age*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1993), xiv. Hereafter *Common Ground.*

[12]Carla Mae Streeter, "Glossary of Lonerganian Terminology," in *Common Ground*, 326.

[13]Lonergan, 282.

[14]Lonergan, 57.

[15]Thomas Farrell, "Writing, the Writer, and Lonergan," *Common Ground*, 25.

[16]Lonergan, 357.

[17]Streeter, 328.

[18]Legend of the Three Companions XIV: 60; see *Francis of Assisi Early Documents*, vol. 2, *The Founder*, R.J. Armstrong, OFM Cap, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, OFM Conv, and W. J. Short, OFM, eds. (NY: New City Press, 1999), 102; Margaret Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 33.

[19]Introduction to *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translation and introduction by Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap and Ignatius C. Brady, OFM (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 4.

[20]William R. Hugo, *Studying the Life of Francis of Assisi* (Quincy, Il.: Franciscan Press, 1996), 139.

[21]Raoul Manselli, "The Spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi," *Greyfriars Review* 3:1 (1989): 44.

[22]James Sauer, "A Commentary on Lonergan's Method in Theology" from www.lonergan.on.ca; 2001), 84.

[23]Thomas Farrell, "Writing, the Writer, and Lonergan: Authenticity and Intersubjectivity," in *Common Ground*, 46.

[24]Farrell, 25

[25]Farrell, 25.

[26]Carla Streeter, "Preaching as a Form of Theological Communications: An Instance of Lonergan's Evaluative Hermeneutics," in *Common Ground*, 65.

[27]Streeter, "Preaching," 66.

[28]J.J. Mueller, "The Role of Theological Symbols in Mediating Cultural Change," in *Common Ground*, 294.

[29]Mueller, 311.

[30]James J. Walter, "Repentance," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987), 875.

[31]Tad Dunne presents a compelling argument for spiritual integration in a discussion of what he terms "the split soul," which is essentially the dialectic/foundations development of trying to actualize religious values while responding to ubiquitous pressures exerted by the secular society that surrounds us. He posits that this presents a cognitive dilemma that is resolved by default in favor of "the world" unless a deliberate effort is made to give precedence to religious values. See Tad Dunne, *Lonergan and Spirituality: Toward a Spiritual Integration* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 3-6.

[32]Keith Warner, OFM, T*he Franciscans: A Family History* (Loretto, PA: Institute for Contemporary Franciscan Life, 1997), 4-16.

[33]Pierre Brunette, *Francis of Assisi and His Conversions*, tr. Paul Lachance and Kathryn Krug (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1997), 92.

[34]Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 136f.

[35]Sorrell, 137.

[36]Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth – Cry of the Poor*, trans. P. Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 216.

[37]Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 284.

[38]Leonardo Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis: A Message of Peace for the World Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), vii.

[39]Boff, *A Message*, 42.

[40]Boff, *A Message*, 43f.

[41]William Cook, "Beatus Pacificus: Francis of Assisi as Peacemaker," *The Cord* 33 (1983): 132-35.

[42]Cook, 136.

[43]Joseph P. Chinnici, "The Lord Give You Peace,"*Westfriars* (February, 1985): 4.

[44]Chinnici, 4.

[45]Chinnici, 6f.

[46]Short, 129.

[47]Bonaventure Stefun, "The Poverello's Legacy," *Review for Religious* (May-June 2001): 286ff.

[48]Bernard McGinn, "Reflections on St. Francis at the New Millennium," *Franciscan Studie*s 58 (2000): 18.

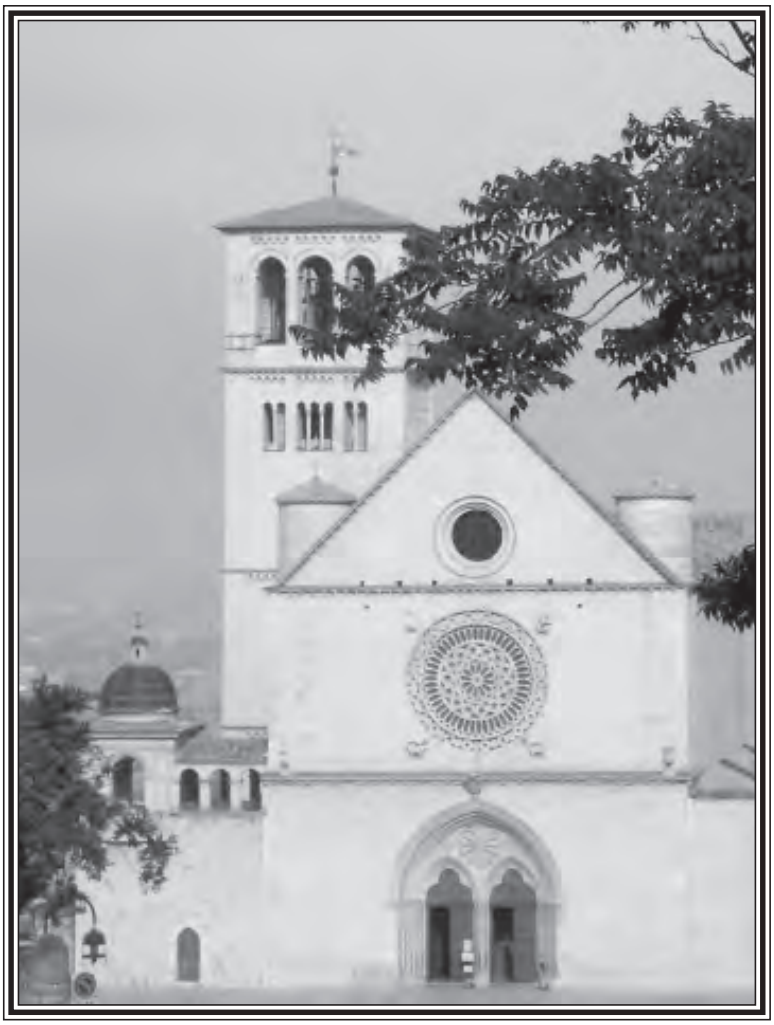


Photo by C. Fischer