



LETTERS FROM ASSISI

Reflections in Franciscan Spirituality

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PREFACE

I left behind a part of me each time I returned home from Assisi. In exchange, I always carried back a part of the town's spirit deep in my soul.

I call myself a disciple of Saint Francis, the little poor man, *il poverello*. Like him, the hills and valleys of Umbria, the intoxicating sights, smells and sounds of cypresses and olive trees, the cascading geraniums, climbing ivy and tufts of lavender, the doves and sparrows, and especially the warmth and radiance of Brother Sun invaded my entire being. Transported to another era by weathered cobblestones, Romanesque churches and medieval chapels, I found countless incarnations of an inspiring saint.

My imagination filtered out the busy shops and noisy tour busses while strolling up the passageways and down the stairways during early and late hours of the day, and sitting quietly in places where Francis prayed, in hidden spots tucked behind pillars, monuments and shrubs. I heard his sweet whisper, not disembodied utterances, but in a continuous series of insights that are carved into their surroundings. There, I interacted with his meagre writings and the verifiable aspects of his life and times that had by then become familiar to me.

Over the years, I have written hundreds of reflections, based on these visits. Some were written on location while others were wrought later from notes that connect me to that mystical place. I share some of them as letters from Assisi.

INTRODUCTION

The radical decision that Francis of Assisi took with regards to the meaning of the Christian Gospel during the opening moments of the 13th 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 of 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 than 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: Franciscans have made up the largest religious order in the history of Christianity, even without counting those communities that were spawned over time by its various members.

While Francis has changed innumerable lives, perhaps no one has been so frequently trivialized by popular devotion. Still, judging from available evidence, the historic Francis is a much more impressive and inspiring figure than the one portrayed in countless pious images. The challenge in our own age, therefore, is to come to know Francis historically despite these myths and the difficulties in understanding an age so remote and foreign to our own socio-political categories; to understand the true meaning of that heritage; to make sound judgments about its relevance to our own times; and to remain authentic while applying his insights to our own lives.

Appropriating his legacy and allowing it to change our lives is important, but it is not enough. As Christians, 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 (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’ legacy still has much to teach us about the communication of gospel values.

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 than 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. Hereafter *Hope*.

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 (11 June 1219), I, 2b” in Cajetan Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970), 218. Hereafter *Origins*.

As a Secular Franciscan and a Permanent Deacon who often endeavoured to write about Christ's teachings from a Franciscan perspective, I am aware of a need to develop - for my own use - more effective approaches for communicating the essence of Francis' spirituality in our own time and culture. As a first step, therefore, it was important for me to gain a better grasp of what impact the Gospel had on him and how this affected his communication to those who heard him preach as well as those who are guided to this day by his response to Jesus' simple yet compelling invitation: "Follow me".⁵

To understand Franciscan spirituality requires a degree of familiarity with its founder and with the culture in which he operated. Francis lived in changing times, as we do today. 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.⁶

Great teachers, such as Buddha, Jesus, Confucius and Mohamed introduced 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....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.⁷

When I was professed as a Secular Franciscan almost thirty years ago, I thought I could not love Francis more. After all, he had been responsible for my return to regular practice of the Catholic faith. When I walked the hills and valleys around Assisi 10 years ago and encountered the spirit of the poverello at the pathways and withdrawn sanctuaries less frequented by tourists, I loved him even more. Five years ago, when I resolved to anchor all my preaching in the solid foundation of Franciscan spirituality, I was sure then that I could not love him more deeply. And when I took the decision to write this thesis about him, I was sure that my love for him now towered well above the timid attachment I had previously felt. The difference each time, of course, had to do with getting to know him better. Most Christians and people of other religions and even many atheists will agree that to know him is to love him. As I have come to know him better for who he must really have been - historically, stripped of devotional clichés - my respect for him has grown exponentially.

The world may not have needed another series of reflection on Francis of Assisi, but as a Franciscan communicator, I did. I needed to conduct an investigation that would help me to convey his spirituality to

5 Matt 9:9; Mk 2:14; 8:34; Lk 5:27-28; Jn 8:12; 1 Pet 2:21; Rev 14:4.

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

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

my contemporaries, not on the basis of pious myths but on an authentic reception of his struggles and his insights. I needed something that would help me to understand and receive the very essence of his legacy in a manner that enabled me to make sound judgments about the value of that heritage for our own post-modern times, and that would be the foundation upon which I could rest reasonable decisions about how his life should change our own.

The spirit of Francis lives today in a dynamic tradition we call Franciscanism. I am painfully aware that just as interest in the diminutive icon of simplicity continues to grow – judging from the number of new publications that appear each year – the number of those who actually follow him into religious life is sharply declining. I remain convinced, nonetheless, that he has much to say to our world about what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, just as I believe that it will take the most ingenious strategies and the best honed skills of professional communicators to mine meaning below the superficiality of “easy” spirituality in order to render that meaning comprehensible, accessible and compelling, and to significantly affect the attitudes and behaviors of citizens of the Third Millennium.

Not only do I believe that the spirituality we call Franciscan is suited to our times, I also believe that it is necessary for our times. It must be dusted off and heralded for its vitality because its genius is to testify to the enduring wisdom of the living Word. It is necessary because so many young people today are of the mind that Francis was before his conversion. It is necessary because so many faithful Christians, albeit well meaning, do not live the Gospel and carry it confidently into “the marketplace”. Sadly, our world, like that of Francis, is fractured by selfishness and shackled by fear. The fraternal love and true joy of Francis, therefore, are both of another era, another land and another culture, and of our own. This belief was aptly phrased in a recent survey of religious life (not by a Franciscan author!): “If God someday granted to his Church the religious order of the future, in the direction toward which so many are already oriented, it would no doubt bear the traits of the spirituality of Francis of Assisi.”⁸

8 Pierre Lippert, S.J. “Un modèle de bonté: François d’Assise”, *Bonté, Vertu d’aujourd’hui et de demain* (Aubier, 1946): 105-112.

1 | FINDING TRUE JOY

JANUARY 2008

“Joy is a special grace of the Franciscan movement.” These delightful words were spoken by Carlo Maria Martini, S.J., at the rising of the new millennium to several young priests on retreat. It certainly helped that the venue for this gathering was La Verna, Italy, the soil upon which Saint Francis of Assisi received the stigmata shortly before his death in 1226, and that one of the subjects assigned to Cardinal Martini was “Perfect Joy in Ministry.”

Saint Francis is remembered by some for austerity and by others for spontaneous joy. Neither is wrong nor wholly correct. Indeed, the most intriguing insight of this enigmatic saint was to discover, as Saint Paul had 1,200 years earlier, “perfect joy” is wisdom, which “is foolishness to the world.” (1Cor.3:19)

Above all the graces and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ grants to his friends, is the grace of overcoming oneself, and accepting willingly, out of love for Christ, all suffering, injury, discomfort and contempt.

– Dictated to Brother Leo, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*

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The definition of joy that we’ve inherited from Saint Francis is difficult to accept. If we believe it but disregard it as an impracticable counsel, we overlook the fact that the poverello arrived at this conclusion at the end of a long and arduous spiritual journey. For our part, we might prefer to climb the same hill by a gentler slope. Let’s see if we can come to understand true joy by another way, a more familiar way—through our own experience.

Everyone wants and needs joy. It is essential to well-being. It is the ultimate healing of grief and the only effective antidote to anxiety, which is the great plague of contemporary society. Perhaps the most telling sign of its absence is boredom, which drives people to pursue false joys, unhealthy pleasures and extreme activities that are neither wholesome nor satisfying. One need only observe how joyless are the faces in print advertising, particularly in the promotion of expensive clothing and cosmetics. (For example, the soulless expressions of the young male faces in Ralph Lauren ads or Revlon’s ‘eternally ageless’ beauties whose expressions have been botoxed away!) If this is the ideal of beauty, where is the joy of having reached the pinnacle? People are joyless for as many reasons there are personal life stories. But in general terms, one of three situations often prevails. People don’t know what it is, look for it in the wrong places or are not prepared to pay the price.

What is joy? We use the word joy often. We typically associate it with happiness in general or the pleasure that we experience from some passing fancy. Some things that we call joy seem genuine. The feeling runs deep and it lasts a good long time after the event that provoked it. We can think of falling in love, savouring natural beauty, and achieving something difficult and important as occasions of extreme happiness.

At other times, we use the word to signify a flash of delight that might even be followed by disillusionment. Sometimes, we know intuitively that this is not true joy but we accept or even cause it because it feels good for a while, even if the long-term cost cannot be justified. This is the case for eating junk food or drinking too much wine. In more problematic cases, the pursuit of false joy can even lead to risking life or

developing dangerous addictions.

So, what is true joy? This is a riddle for most of us, perhaps the most perplexing question of all. We all need it and most of us yearn for it, yet it's so elusive. We know not what it looks like, where to find it or, if we catch a glimpse of it, grasp it and retain it.

To begin with, it may be helpful to differentiate between two types, both real but different in nature.

Like pleasure, a true experience of joy is triggered by something external to the person and lasts only a relatively short time. But unlike pleasure that occurs only in the absence of pain, the experience of joy rises because of favourable conditions within, a disposition of the heart that is free to greet a marvellous event, even in the presence of suffering. And unlike pleasure, the experience of joy produces consolation that continues to nourish the soul long after the event has passed. It is a powerful inner response to something at once simple and mysterious, such as an insight, the birth of a baby or the discovery of gratuitous goodness in the midst of tragedy.

Each of us has had experiences of true joy. Radical examples are found in Christian Scripture, including the Epiphany (“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”—Mt.2:10); the Transfiguration (“And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is well that we are here.’”—Mk.9:5); and the experience of the Emmaus disciples (“They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us?’”—Lk.24:32) Indeed, all followers of Jesus Christ are called to joy.

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

– Acts 13: 52

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While we can't create joy, we can create the conditions that are favourable to an experience of it. These will differ from one person to another. That's why it's important to know what is joyful for us and what blocks our access to it. They are often linked to healthy pleasures but sometimes, as in the cases of the experiences of the magi, the apostles, and the disciples, joy is a surprising bonus for having a well-disposed heart—one that is open to the child-like quality of awe, not barricaded by fear. As well, we must consciously avoid or courageously dismantle the conditions that sap life of its natural joy. This requires avoiding situations that are overly stressful and normally associated with high levels of anxiety, including toxic relationships and events that remind us of earlier tragedies.

Experiences of joy are very important. The memories of them sustain us through difficult periods in our life. The hope of them stimulates us to take risks in connecting with people, in pursuing dreams and in overcoming obstacles. Joy is to be found in “peak experiences,” and in the passionate pursuit and savouring of what nourishes us—food, friends, and beautiful things (art, nature, etc.)

On the other hand, the state of joy is marked by its duration and resilience. It can persist through darkness and light, with or without pleasure, even during periods of physical, emotional or spiritual pain. Among other things, its presence is confirmed by consolation and energy. A person in a state of joy is generally more patient, perseverant and hopeful than most others around them. They are slower to become anxious

and rarely panic; they can maintain a level of effort over a longer period of time because they are not prone to cynicism and are less inclined to get discouraged by set-backs. They are positive though not naïve in outlook, confident about the power of virtue though realistic about human foibles, and trusting in the goodwill of others while aware of how woundedness can cause others to behave destructively.

Such a person is open to being surprised by joy. Experiences of joy are most acutely felt by those who live in a state of receptivity to them. In *Surprised by Joy* (1956), written seven years before his death, C.S. Lewis helped shed light on the unexpected experience of joy. It is essentially an account of those life experiences that brought Lewis to a mature, adult Christian faith. A longing for a restoration of the joy he experienced as a boy, permeates the entire book. Lewis turns first to the written word as an outlet for this ongoing search, creating wonderful stories such as the *Tales of Narnia*.

Lewis also explored the writings of two distinguished authors: George MacDonald, the nineteenth-century Scot Presbyterian minister and novelist, and G. K. Chesterton, popular and prolific London journalist, and a talented Christian apologist in his own right. Lewis then discovered the fullness of joy in a new appreciation of the faith of his childhood, one based on personal authenticity and unrestricted engagement in loving relationships. From Lewis' perspective, the joy he had so long sought had been discovered in the least likely place within the least likely circumstances. Lewis wrote, "In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. . . . God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous."

The consolation that characterizes the state of joy facilitates our acceptance with equanimity of life's vagaries and allows us to exclaim spontaneously in the most ordinary moments, "God, it's good to be alive." Indeed, a joyful person is fully alive, as evidenced by well-defined motivation and energy.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

– John 10: 10

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FEBRUARY 2008

The Oxford Dictionary defines joy as a “pleasurable emotion due to well-being or satisfaction.” Our faith tells us something different. It reminds us that true joy is not due to something external but rather that it is a grace held within. For that reason, joy is different from pleasure. It is also more than an emotion. Rather, it is a quiet confidence in Providence, God’s particular benevolence. Consequently, we don’t see well-being or satisfaction quite as the world understands these terms. True joy neither requires the presence of pleasure nor the absence of pain.

“Joy is a special grace of the Franciscan movement,” Carlo Maria Martini, S.J., told young priests on retreat at La Verna at the rising of the new millennium. When we look to the source of that religious tradition, our eyes settle upon an enigmatic figure that combines austerity and jubilation; poverty and possession of all the wonders of the created world; and a peculiar fidelity to a deeply flawed church that reminds us of Jesus’ loving relationship to sinners. For Saint Francis, all was joy.

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

(James 1: 2-4)

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The question that arises is “What causes that grace to be present?” As with all graces, the answer is partly, “Nothing but God’s free will.” Grace is gift, free and unmerited in the strictest sense. It is not an automatic response to conditions met by us. But in part, it is safe to say that certain conditions do make our appropriation of that grace easier. I propose a set of three that I call a “path to joy,” that comprises three sections.

The first is simplicity. British novelist Aldous Huxley called it “the perennial philosophy.” The Franciscan writer and lecturer Richard Rohr concluded “There is no other way.” And American essayist Henri David Thoreau regarded it as the soundest advice for any situation, “Simplify, simplify, simplify.” Saint Francis clearly recognized its importance, “Hail, Wisdom Queen, may the Lord protect thee, with thy sister, pure and holy Simplicity.” (In Praise of Virtues) Indeed, simplicity exercised with wisdom enables us to find true joy because it leads to gratitude and generosity, which are key conditions for joy.

Simplicity is the best guard against falsehood, which distracts or saps our attention and energy for joy. Simplicity reduces our options, making it easier to focus on what is necessary and life-giving. It invites us to deny frivolous obsessions for prestige, power and possession. José Hobde, a Seneca Iroquois Franciscan from the US Southwest, whom I had the honour of meeting a few years ago, wrote, “Simplicity allows us to walk in the rhythm of what is, of reality.”

Reality—our own and that of the world around it—is the foundation of simplicity. Knowledge of this spares us the inclination to needlessly complicate our lives because of persistent cues coming from the illusion of need (sometimes called wants), lies (priorities set by those motivated by ulterior motives) and deception (the masks that we wear to protect against an invasive or threatening world). Instead of illusions, lies and deception, simplicity calls us to centre our lives on what is genuinely necessary to achieving the

purpose for which we were created. Among the tasks related to simplification, therefore, is discerning what that purpose is. We'll come back to that another time.

Many people intuitively sense the need to simplify their lives. Some may try for a time and then discover that the agenda, the closet and the mind gets cluttered again almost overnight and almost magically. Why is that? In part, it is because we fail to find relevant criteria by which to choose. That brings us back to the issue of discernment. In part too, it is because making choices is difficult, even painful, and may result in grieving some of the valued things that have not made the cut. So we tolerate complexity and anxiety because we cannot decide our way through the overwhelming number of choices in our modern world. We put up with stress too because we feel a void within us and stuff that space with whatever comes to mind or to hand. (This too will come back as a theme in a later reflection.) Simply put, simplicity costs too much for most of us.

We are not the first to feel that way. In a poem entitled "Little Gidding", poet T.S. Eliot famously wrote, "...a condition of complete simplicity, costing nothing less than everything." The price is too high for most of us. Yet, denying ourselves the gift of simplicity also is costing nothing less than everything.

So, is simplicity even more elusive than joy? Is it only practical for monks? Each person has a unique set of challenges and must deal with them one by one. To simplify our lives, we must face the reality of why complexity has been allowed to enter our lives and which systems or elements are expendable. Simplicity is a relative term; simplification is a goal and a process that requires attention, determination and perseverance. It also requires trust and confidence in God, in ourselves and in others.

Simplicity seems to go against the grain of human nature. Nothing distracts us from our appointed purpose more than fear. Fear is the silent partner to sin, whether as omission or commission. Fear causes us to hate, to hoard, to hide behind masks and to seek security in power and wealth. But in the end, masks are ineffective. Wealth and power disappoint and fragment us. We lose track of who we are, why we are and for whom we are. Fear distorts perverts and disintegrates our true, God-given desires. Fear impairs our capacity for simplicity, unity, self-control and self-transcendence.

To come to possession in all, desire the possession of nothing.

(Saint John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, also quoted by T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

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We have all had our own struggles with simplicity. Each of us has felt the burden of stuffed closets, brimming agendas and lifestyles that just seem unnecessarily stressful and complex. Despite efforts to unclutter these, the opposite seems to occur. Because nature abhors a vacuum, for each action to simplify, there is a more than equal and opposite pressure to replace what we've eliminated with new clutter. It's important to recognize this tendency because we can never successfully simplify our lives by elimination alone. We must dislodge clutter with what is vital to our wellbeing. This may include setting aside prescribed times of the day or week for quietness, for activities that bring us joy, and even for being spontaneously available to seemingly serendipitous grace—availability and consciousness to be surprised by joy. It may include setting a budget for clothes and electronic gadgets. Each person will have to adopt a strategy that is appropriate to their own vulnerability to allowing power, prestige and possessions to block

the route to happiness. The irony is that we allow ourselves to be persuaded by advertisers that these things constitute or enable joy. Yet we know—in the sober light of quiet reflection—that their effect is destructive at least in the long run.

Despite my knowledge of the importance of simplicity and my spiritual commitment to it, I struggle like everybody else with the discipline to say “no” to enticing opportunities that seem to multiply exponentially with the passage of time. I have often culled clothes from my closet and stored items from my basement. I have steadily lessened my dependency on goods and services. And I have turned down requests to participate in activities when I have begun to feel exhausted by the pace of life. I have also looked at how I approach activities, striving to choose the simpler rather than the more developed route. Most of you have also done these things. What I have found is that the benefit of this purgation is short-lived unless I focus my mind and heart to the joy of the less complex lifestyle. To be sustainable, a simpler life must be based on options that satisfy our most fundamental human and spiritual aspirations. Essentially, the simple life must be a shortcut to a deeply desired destination.

Simplicity is not simplistic. Naivety is more likely to have us shrink from challenges or to make bad choices that will ultimately complicate our lives. Simplicity takes wisdom, and courage to act on self-awareness. There are those who would resign themselves to mediocrity rather than run the risk of dealing with stress and complexity. These will not find joy except by chance. Spiritual simplicity requires an energetic response to our true identity, giftedness and purpose. Consequently, simplicity is a strategy to avoid distractions and detours, and to become single-minded in the pursuit of what is most critical to the joyful achievement of our life’s mission.

We readily associate simplicity with the life of Saint Francis. But one can seriously question how likely he would have been to set the standard for simplicity if he had not come to an awareness of true joy. He came to understand it as being inextricably tied to his Christian identity and mission. This became patently clear to him on the Feast of St. Matthias, February 24, 1209, when he heard the Gospel of the sending of the disciples. Afterward, he remained to ask the priest to explain the meaning of the verses. Upon understanding, he rejoiced saying: “This is what I want; this is what I long for with all my heart!” The rest was a simple matter of judging all things in terms of whether they facilitated or impeded his journey to making these verses the pattern of his life. Evangelical poverty became but a tool with which he would extricate himself from stubborn distractions.

Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”... Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff.

(Mt. 10:5, 9-10)

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MARCH 2008

In my February reflection, I wrote of the path to joy and proposed that it comprises three sections, simplicity being the first. Our destination is different from what the world understands joy to be. True joy is a state of grace that we can most efficaciously possess with attitudes advocated in Christian tradition.

How can we recognize true simplicity? Are not some people who avoid complexity really depressed or avoiding responsibility? Depression and avoidance rarely lead to joy. On the other hand, true simplicity promotes consciousness, fosters growth in areas vital to the person's purpose, giftedness and mission, and—as we will see over the course of the next few reflections—puts us on the path to joy. True simplicity opens onto recognition that we have more than we need, that we can—with the help of God and others—achieve all that is important to our well-being and happiness. Once our expectations become grounded in reality and our needs are differentiated from the endless and insatiable wants that advertising thrusts upon us, we become aware of our abundance and are grateful for it. In other words, gratitude is the mark of the simple life.

Gratitude, therefore, is the second section of the path of joy, which I will address in this month's reflection. It is the heart of prayer (Cf. David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer*). As we express gratitude, we become more aware of it; and the greater our awareness, the greater our need to express it. What we enter is a spiralling ascent from the gift to the giver. Prayer leads gratefully to the provider and engages in meaningful communion and absorption into the life-giving dynamic of a triune God.

Gratitude comes in many sizes. We can have an experience of gratitude, such as a common but sincere “thank you” for a favour. At the other end of the spectrum, we can live in a state of gratitude, genuine love for all givers, especially God. So, gratitude can be grown, just as simplicity can. It is a muscle that expands with use. Gratitude grows where there is trust, where there is humility and where there is love. To become more thankful, we must deny fear and assume a proper relationship to others that accepts with equanimity both giftedness and woundedness. We must nurture hope. Hope and gratitude operate in a symbiosis; they depend on one another. Hope is the confidence that we have in an unknown future. Gratitude is our awareness and appropriation of that hope.

May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15: 13) With joy, give thanks to the Father who had made you fit to have your share of what God has reserved for his people in the kingdom of light. (Col. 1: 12)

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There is a story in Matthew's Gospel about people who are invited to a wedding celebration. Most people initially refuse to attend; but they are subsequently entreated to reconsider. On an allegorical level, the invitation to the wedding banquet is a public invitation to solidarity in Christ the groom with the people of God. But it is also something more; it is a personal invitation to communion with the Lord through prayer. Often our reaction to the “obligation” to pray is negative. But God persists because he knows that our failure to make an effort to enter into dialogue with him will harm us by depriving us of the spiritual nourishment that is vital to our well-being.

Steindl-Rast puts it this way: “Gratefulness is one way of experiencing the life of the Triune God within

us. This life springs forth from the Father, the fountain and wellspring of divinity, the ultimate Giver. The total self-gift of the Father is the Son. The Son receives everything from the Father and becomes the turning point in this divine tide of giving. For in the Holy Spirit the Son returns the Father's ultimate giving as ultimate thanksgiving. The Triune God is Giver, Gift, and Thanksgiving. This movement from the Father through the Son in the Spirit back to its Sources is what St. Gregory of Nyssa called 'the Round Dance of the Blessed Trinity'. This is one way God prays: by dancing. It is one great celebration of belonging by giving and thanksgiving. We can begin to join that dance in our heart right now through gratefulness."

Isaiah, one of God's emissaries sent long before the birth of Jesus in anticipation of the banquet to come, counselled "Let us be glad and rejoice." In other words, Isaiah tells us that mere acceptance of the invitation is not enough. Participation requires a heart filled with gladness and rejoicing. Participation means total participation. We do not attend a banquet only to eat the salad or to dance with those who dress fashionably. Our hosts expect us to participate fully in body, mind and spirit. Moreover, we are expected to bring a gift, which is a symbol of our fully engaged selves. We are invited both to enjoy and to contribute to the enjoyment of others. Receiving and giving are the rhythm and beat of the sacred dance.

It is normal that we should want to be selective about what makes us grateful. It is no less normal for us to be inclined to hold a sour attitude toward the things that give us little pleasure. But each time that we give in to this temptation, we miss an extraordinary occasion of grace—the grace with which gratitude transforms what displeases us into a blessing. Gratitude is the catalyst.

The watershed moment in the conversion of Saint Francis occurred when he kissed a leper. At the end of his life, he recalled with gratitude this pivotal moment and made it the key reference in his spiritual Testament. These are the very first verses: "This is how the Lord gave me, brother Francis, the power to do penance. When I was in sin the sight of lepers was too bitter for me. And the Lord himself led me among them, and I pitied and helped them. And when I left them I discovered that what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness in my soul and body. And shortly afterward I rose and left the world." A daring act of fearless simplicity led to gratitude and, ultimately, to joy.

Saint Francis, a man of simplicity and prayer, was immensely grateful for all that he had. This is perhaps best characterized by his profound joy in greeting creation as the expression of God's infinite and unconditional love for every being: "Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures. Chief of all is Sir Brother Sun, who is our day; through whom you give light. Beautiful is he, radiant, with great splendour. He is a true revealer of You, Most High. Praise be to You, my Lord, for Sister Moon and for the stars. In heaven you have formed them, bright, precious and fair." These effusive verses are charged with such gratitude that a mere thank you cannot suffice. Simplicity, gratitude, prayer and joy meld into one.

Prayer is an attitude of the heart that can transform every activity. We cannot say prayers at all times. But we ought to 'pray without ceasing'. That means we ought to keep our heart open for the meaning of life. Gratefulness does this, moment by moment. Gratefulness is, therefore, prayerfulness. Moments in which we drink deeply from the source of meaning are moments of prayer, whether we call them so or not. There is no human heart that does not pray, at least in deep dreams that nourish life with meaning. What matters is prayer, not prayers.

(Steindl-Rast, Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer)

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Buddhist tradition places a high value on the necessity of gratitude. Indeed, it is regarded as an obligation. But while some people may view a debt of gratitude as a burdensome obligation, Buddhism teaches that the real pressure which weakens society is ingratitude. There is no one who does not owe a debt of gratitude to others. In a very real way, therefore, gratitude may be seen as consciousness of our lives as being supported by others. Christians would add the ultimate Other, God. Buddhists owe a debt of gratitude to all living beings as well as to the Buddha, the Buddhist teaching and the Buddhist community. (Cf. Shin Yatomu, Buddhist Study) Could Christians say less of our debt to God, to his Word and Holy Spirit?

Like Christianity, Buddhism invites adherents to develop a perspective and capacity to see even hardship in a positive light by giving it meaning. We can experience a sense of gratitude for something beyond what we want or expect. Everything—most particularly existence itself—is a gift.

For almost 20 years now, I have been involved in ministering to the bereaved. As my knowledge and experiences grow, I continue to marvel at how God—with our collaboration—turns darkness into light or, at the very least, turns our attention to Light that cannot be diminished by the darkness. Evidently, there is grace in all circumstances. Hopefulness is the key to seeing it, appreciating it and rejoicing in it. Many people whom I've accompanied have been liberated by new insights gained in the midst of tragedy. Many have even come to gain a new appreciation of God's tenderness and benevolent action, because they have been transformed by hope strengthened by faith. Often, we hear the expression, "Stars are only visible in the night."

Awareness of God's mercy, forgiveness and boundless generosity is the appropriation of joy. As simplicity reminds us that our needs are no where as intricate and inaccessible as the spider-web of false desires that often lure us into stressful habits, we come to find consolation in truth, trust and thanksgiving.

Enough is a feast. (A Buddhist proverb)

APRIL 2008

In the last months, we noted how a spirit of simplicity and gratitude are essential to living in a state of joy.

How, then, can we know that true gratitude exists in ourselves or in another?

Ever-expanding gratitude produces generosity, which we also call love or charity. Generosity is the active, forward-looking, hopeful and joyful expression of love. It understands that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (Jm.2:17) Like Saint Francis, one can be “poorer in wealth ... richer in generosity.” (Cf. Celano, Life of St. Francis) In a way, that’s the whole purpose of evangelical poverty. If voluntary poverty does not increase generosity of spirit, it is not being lived authentically. Gratitude produces generosity through a profound sense of plenitude, not deprivation. Literally, we come to feel that we are being filled to overflowing. (Cf. Ps.23:5)

That is why true generosity is closely related to authenticity. Without a healthy appreciation of our giftedness and woundedness, we cannot behave freely and intentionally. Rather, our words and actions are largely guided by invisible strings that run deep into our subconscious. We know neither their origin nor their direction. As long as this is the case, we operate out of need, not abundance. Deeds that can appear to be generous are at risk of being thinly veiled manipulation or, at the very least, constructed as self-serving.

A generous spirit, therefore, expresses joy because its purpose is other-serving and favours the blossoming of love. Moreover, the fearless and free action that expresses this generosity in turn produces even more joy because it builds up relationships that are vital and essential to our well-being.

True generosity is neither a duty nor a need. It is a desire that springs from gratitude. Regardless of where the gratitude is directed, generosity is generally scattered more widely. If it is sincere, generosity is expressed almost recklessly as random acts of kindness. True generosity is generative.

The 1988 movie “Pay It Forward”, with Kevin Spacey and Helen Hunt, made a gripping point of this principle. The sum of all of this generosity is a world in which we are all better off. Catherine Ryan Hyde, author of the book on which the movie was based, wrote from a lived experience of gratitude paid forward to someone, and concluded, “I spent the next 20 years wondering what kind of world it would be if an idea like that caught fire.”

It is in giving that we receive.

– Prayer of Saint Francis

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Luke’s Gospel points to a revealing perspective on generosity. In the story sometimes called “The Widow’s Mite,” rich men offer “gifts from what they had to spare of their riches,” while the widow deposits two little copper coins, “all that she had to live on.” (Cf. 21: 1-4) The widow gives away not only her whole livelihood, but the core of who she is.

William Yeomans, in an article entitled “The Divine Generosity” (The Way, 1977), comments, “Her

generosity generated the Life of the world, and her awareness of her poverty permitted the fulfillment of the Magnificat.” He explains, “Generosity has to do with a particular quality of giving. It is the giving of self out of love, and out of awareness that all we have to give is self, in such a way that new life is born out of our giving.”

Like so many authors, Yeomans remarks that we learn about generosity from God but suggests that we often fail to see the true nature of God’s giving, because “our understanding is clouded by an imagination of God as some sort of super-millionaire dispensing largesse out of his treasury...too, we are so infected by this materialistic age as to imagine that God gives us things.” These models fail to reveal God’s self-giving, particularly in Creation, in Christ and in the Holy Spirit: “The only God we know is a God who is an immense movement of giving....His gift is not things but a person, a communication of himself and his being....Jesus is the generosity of God, of his free giving, come to give us life.... ‘This is my body which is given for you.’...To receive the Spirit whom Jesus gives is to enter into and become part of that great movement of the givingness of God.”

The kind of generous spirit that leads to true joy is a divine principle. It is not managed philanthropy that merely gives away the interest on hoarded wealth but gives away ourselves fully invested in an exciting dynamism of giving and receiving—of self-giving without expectation of return but in the certain knowledge that we are fulfilled. Inevitably, with that spirit, we end up receiving more than we give, not necessarily then and there but sometime, somewhere.

Because this is a divine principle, it is best learned directly by observation of God’s action in the world. In human history, God has spared no effort to give and forgive, literally until it hurt and then gave and forgave again, and again, and again. God emptied himself into the Son. Christ emptied himself. (Cf. Phil. 2: 7) Again, God emptied himself by returning Christ’s Holy Spirit to us that we may not be alone in our perennial and often-misguided quest for true joy. By example, God says, “If you truly want joy, then truly love as Jesus did.”

The link between God-modeled generosity and joy is evident. Where Saint Paul explains Christ’s self-emptying, he adds in the next two verses, Christ “humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name.” In that moment there was a new beginning of God’s glory in human history, the glory and the joy of Christ, his Son made man.

Jesus was obedient to the Father’s generative goodness and love. From the Life of the Trinity, we learn the fecundity and joy of generosity. From God’s grace, we make this mystical dance the pattern for our life.

*Lord, teach me to be generous.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve; to give and not count the cost;
to fight and not heed the wounds; to toil and not seek for rest;
to labour and not ask for reward, except to know
that I am doing your will.*

– Saint Ignatius of Loyola

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Simplicity, gratitude and generosity, with God's grace, lead to a state of joy. This is possible because peaceful simplicity leads to consciousness of reality and the benevolence of God as expressed in Life itself, in community and in creation. In turn, gratitude, especially directed at the giver, leads to generosity or love, which is the source of resilient and consoling joy. Saint Thomas Aquinas argued explicitly that joy is the fruit of love. (Cf. Summa Theologica II, Q28) Ultimately, generosity of spirit disposes the heart to the Holy Spirit's gift of joy, which God is eager to share. With Saint Paul, we can "be joyful always, pray at all times." (1Thes.5:16) We can accept the fullness of the good news that John wrote of so "that our joy may be complete." (1Jn.1:4)

When I was in my twenties, I met an older man whom I came to know rather well. I took an interest in him because of his seemingly irrepressible joy. Circumstances did not readily justify his zest for life and spontaneous generosity. He was poor. His parents had struggled to house and feed a family, and so had he. His meagre farm did not suffice in providing for them. To supplement his income, he took jobs here and there. Work was scarce and wages were inadequate. The financial stress alone would have given most of us a sour disposition, if not cause for full-blown depression.

What he had, he shared without hesitation. If you commented that something looked nice or useful, you'd find it at the door as you were leaving, then he'd insist that he'd be offended if you didn't take it as a gift. (You soon learned to avoid making such comments!) He cheered those who worried; encouraged those who struggled—always with an understated wisdom and self-deprecating humour. He loved without reservation. Wildflowers picked from the work fields were gathered and handed to his wife. No favour was unreasonable; no neighbour would do without his help. No visitor could leave without a meal, even in times of scarcity.

This man whom I came to deeply admire and regard as a saintly man, despite his coarse manner and lack of obvious piety, walked in joy along the path of simplicity, gratitude and generosity. To this day, it is his image that springs to mind when I consider the nature of true joy. The divine principle of self-emptying was incarnate in the spirit of this uneducated, un-theologized, unassuming, unpretentious and unselfish disciple of Jesus Christ. Instead, he was filled with faith, hope and love; with gentle kindness and patient confidence.

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

– Colossians 1: 11-12

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MAY 2008

For many of us joy is as elusive as it is yearned for. We long for it as much as we do peace and love but we often can't seem to find it, grasp it or hold on to it. Too often, it is like a mirage or sand that slips between our fingers. Why is that? The answer is either that we don't know what joy is truly or that we normally look for it in the wrong places. In last month's reflection, we examined the question of what is true joy. Now, let's consider the matter of where it is to be found.

Saint Augustine famously wrote in his autobiographical confessions something that provides guidance for our search. He was writing about God but the passage could just as easily relate to joy. He reflected, "Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created.

"You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace."

In fact, not only do we normally look for joy in the wrong places, we run from the right places. Why is that? Against all logic, the place where true joy is to be found is also the place of our deepest woundedness. And all of our instincts, intelligence and strength mobilize to avoid the pain that we know lies dormant there. At least at a superficial level, it makes no sense to seek joy where pain is to be found. But if it is true that both lie side-by-side at the core of our being, there must be a relationship between woundedness and joy. Indeed, there is.

At the very centre of our being is an expression of divinity—a unique word made flesh: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gn.1:27) That word is the particular name by which we are known to God: "I have called you by name, you are mine." (Is.43:1) That word/name is the essence of our being; it is our true spiritual identity. All life flows from it. It is also the fountainhead of our giftedness and the source of our purpose or mission, sometimes known as our call or vocation. Classic categories of mission relate to work done by the mind (intellectual), the body (active) or the heart (affective.) Our "name" is a very particular expression of one of these.

Significantly, from the moment of inception, we have been endowed with a unique combination of talents that are God-given. These are the tools with which we are called to live out our purpose. From the start, our orientation has been outward. Our life's meaning concerns relationship and community. Our life's journey is to first allow others to love us so that we can learn to love others. Our goal is to transcend the self and to actualize our potential in communion with others.

As you will have guessed, this loving self-transcendence is the source of our joy. Joy is the fruit of love, the actualization of our unique purpose in this magnificent project of building a kingdom of love that is authentic and pure. If that is so, why would we not "always be joyful?" (1Thes.5:16)

From the moment of our conception, we are developing physically, emotionally, intellectually and

spiritually. This development is gradual, cumulative and—theoretically at least—integrated. We are unaware of these stages and so are our parents. Each stage is vital. Each person grows from the womb to the world because of things happening within and around them. The problem is that it is never a smooth process. We never get all of our needs satisfied, no matter how attentive those who care for us might be. Moreover, to one degree or another, we all receive things that are harmful to our development. This is normal. Only in extreme cases, can this be called abuse.

The journey of development is very often problematical at one stage or another: during pregnancy or birth; during the first six months when physical needs are most acute; during the first two years when emotional needs are manifested; or during the first ten years when intellectual foundations are being established. (Timing is approximate and varies from person to person.) Disturbances in development in any stage results in “wounds” that impact the formation of personality and the life choices made later in life.

What could be more vulnerable than our spiritual identity, the unique “word” that gives meaning to our life? For this reason, the blow that cuts deepest, the wound that leave the longest scar and cause the greatest fear and flight is the inadvertent or deliberate one that attacks our God-given “name.” Our primary woundedness, the one that predisposes us to make bad choices that divert our attention from the source of our true joy, is directly related to our particular vulnerability. The wound that is the most frightening to face and hardest to heal is the one that reaches the core of our being.

What could be more devastating than an attack—wilful or unwitting—on the very gifts that God gave us to live out our mission in life? Tragically, in many cases, there is no conscious memory of such wounds, so these life-giving gifts lie deeply buried under layers of assumed identities or activities for which family and friends praised and rewarded us. Worse yet, there is an unconscious resistance to going anywhere near them because they have become associated with pain. With them, lies buried our true joy.

There is, therefore, a real need to reclaim our true identity. This is typically only possible in adulthood by deliberately separating our selves from the emotional “baggage” of childhood.

To respect father and mother does not mean that we must submit to the projects or desires that they have for us; nor compensate for their deficiencies, to fulfill them; nor shelter them from suffering; nor submit to emotional blackmail; nor remain dependant. To respect father and mother is to accept them as they are, with their history, their woundedness; to not oblige them to change and become what we wished they were; to let them follow their path and to give ourselves permission to follow our own; to allow them to love us in their own way. (Rough translation)

– Simone Pacot, *L'évangélisation des profondeurs*

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Let's examine how early childhood woundedness distorts our identity. Fear and anxiety, along with their cousins anger and guilt, are perhaps the most urgent drivers of negative behaviour. They come directly from our woundedness. It is important to understand that at a spiritual level these are the Enemy's tools to ensure that we live in darkness, as far from our identity, giftedness and purpose as possible. If we were rooted in our name, gifts and mission, we'd be aligned—in communion—with God. So the “prince of illusion”, as I like to call our spiritual enemy, dances on our wounds to keep them from healing. The trickster knows

that the joy that is also to be found there would overcome fear, anxiety, anger, guilt, and ultimately despair. In turn despair destroys hope and any possibility of love, which is necessary to human life. So he will do everything possible to have us live elsewhere.

Elsewhere means the roles that we assume, the defence mechanisms that restrict our freedom, the sub-personalities that fragment our lives and the traits of character or personality that we subtly adopt to respond to external forces rather than deep-seated desires for authenticity and self-transcendence. Together, these represent the dynamic of our psycho-spiritual reality. The challenge is to find the movement of the Holy Spirit through the complexity of this assumed identity, through the maze of our constructed self. In fact, the Holy Spirit urges us to return to the energy from which we were created. God's spirit offers us fullness of life (Cf. Jn.10:10) and joy. (Cf.Jn.15:11)

Fragmented lives can neither detect nor decode the life signs that emanate constantly from God. Addicted to distractions because truth scares us, we live by duty and need and settle for the illusion of freedom. True freedom—to love with maturity—requires alignment with the core of our being. To hear the bidding of God's spirit that dwells there, we must silence the mind, still the heart, and stop the treadmill that voraciously consumes our energy. Meaningless noise, misguided passion and extreme activity are as ineffective to fill the painful emptiness that we feel when disconnected from our core as they are destructive to body, mind and soul. The din of daily life blocks God's still small voice.

And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

– 1 Kings 19:11-12

The conversion of Saint Francis of Assisi, that began by his encounter with lepers and achieved a pinnacle with the stigmata, was a steady progress of discerning the still small voice of God through the complexity of life experiences, human frailties, and deep seated desires. He became a saint through awareness of the dynamics of his personality, authenticity with regards to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and focus on what was going on inside him in relation to the world.

In many ways, this is the same pattern in the lives of all saint, and it ought to become our own. To be fully alive in the Spirit, we must be aware of our spiritual identity (“I have called you by name, you are mine.” – Is.43:1); assert the gifts with which he had endowed us (“And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more,’” - Mt.25:20); and live the purpose for which he created us (“Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call.” – Rm.9:11)

But this cannot be accomplished without shedding illusions and overcoming fears so that we can know who we are, what we are, and why we are. To do this, we must become more aware of two interdependent dimensions of human existence—our psychological dynamic and the movement of the Holy Spirit within us. One effective system for doing that is called psychosynthesis, a theory and practice of human development that was initiated by Roberto Assagioli. He embraced the radical new currents of psychoanalysis pioneered by his contemporaries Freud and Jung, but around 1910 laid the groundwork for an approach that affirms the spiritual dimension of the person, the “higher” or “transpersonal” self, in a way that coheres with traditional understandings of Christianity.

The practice of psychosynthesis challenges the individual to accept the past, appreciate the present and assume personal responsibility for the future. Its underlying personality theory is often schematized as an egg in which the “I”, or personal self, resides at the centre. The “I”, which stands at a distance from the dynamics of the personality and controls the will, is surrounded by a conscious field, in which there is a constant flow of feelings, images, thoughts and desires, around which is the mid-level unconscious, which is the source of creative and intellectual activity; it is the locus of gestation. Below is the inferior unconscious, where reside primary impulses, childhood woundedness and suppressed desires.

Above is the superior unconscious or supra-consciousness where are found deep intuitions and states of altruism and the higher faculties of the spirit. Around the egg is found the collective unconscious containing archaic and archetypical structures that remotely affect our perceptions and decisions. Finally, at the very top, straddling the boundary between the higher unconscious and the collective unconscious is the spiritual or transpersonal self, the true heart of the person.

Ultimately, psychosynthesis aims to bring together the various parts of an individual’s personality into a more cohesive self so that the person can then function in a way that is integrated, more life-affirming, authentic and faithful to what are, in effect, Christian values. The project of reconciling values after the example of Jesus Christ himself requires self-awareness, self-acceptance and commitment to self-transcendence; its objective being to achieve union with God in a manner that corresponds to the person’s unique spiritual identity or calling, a state which produces fruits of God’s own Spirit, including spiritual joy.

A human being, in his present state of evolution, is not a harmonious and coherent unity. He is made up of a mass of heterogeneous and contrasting elements grouped around different centers that are found at different levels relatively independent of each other... (These elements and centers) can be divided into two groups. Those that compose the ordinary human personality and those that constitute the superior individuality, the Soul properly so called. Now, while the ordinary joys and pleasures are felt by the personality, Spiritual Joy is the property of the individuality.

– Roberto Assagioli, *Spiritual Joy*

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The practice of psychosynthesis is well suited to spiritual direction precisely because it seeks to promote “a harmonious and coherent unity” in a person, the result of which is honest openness to the deepest desire of the human heart, which is to engage in meaningful and loving relationships with others, including the ultimate Other. The awareness that it fosters enables growing consciousness that results in intellectual, moral and religious conversion. Psychosynthesis promotes identification of inner spiritual conflicts and their resolution by freeing the true from the false self.

Psychosynthesis engages the entire person by drawing on all aspects of the person’s past and all hopes and apprehensions regarding the future, but it is situated more precisely in the present where the centrality of consciousness is most critical and vital. In this present, the grandeur of each existential moment is best achieved through communion with God. It is the role of the director to enable expansion of the directee’s field of consciousness and to facilitate his/her identification of interior conflicts that obscure awareness of God’s call. As awareness grows, the “I” exercises increasing control over the content of the conscious and, to a degree, mid-level unconscious through the will, which is like a muscle that must be developed to perform effectively.

The ideal state for any individual is to be free and aware enough to always act and react authentically out of his/her unique and God-given identity, purpose and attendant giftedness. Though ideal, this situation never occurs entirely. In reality, each of us carries from the earliest moments of our life wounds, fears and anxieties that color our understanding and judgement, and shape our actions. As life’s hurts accumulate, our spiritual identity becomes layered over with defence mechanisms, which are incarnated into sub-personalities. Many of these can be quite functional to the degree that they are adapted to the various circumstances of our life.

Distortions, however, inevitably occur when we identify with any of these sub-personalities, because each is necessarily incomplete and maybe even contrary to our true identity. Our true nature is to be found when the “I” is linked to our higher self. Consequently, sub-personalities are false selves. But, at any given moment, if we are not sufficiently aware of the dynamics of our personality, we are inclined to identify with any of them, particularly if these have been effective in limiting fear and anxiety. But sub-personalities cannot be effective in all circumstances and are impotent to yield true spiritual joy quite simply because they cannot be in communion with God. They can never be in dialogue with God because he is Life itself, and they are the unwitting negation of the life that he has lovingly created.

We are not unified; we often feel that we are, because we do not have many bodies and many limbs, and because one hand doesn’t usually hit the other. But, metaphorically, that is exactly what does happen within us. Several sub-personalities are continually scuffling: impulses, desires, principles, aspirations are engaged in an unceasing

struggle.

– Assagioli, quoted in by Ferrucci in *What We May Be*

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While sub-personalities can detract from our true self, they reveal something of life's circumstances as well as the deepest desires of the heart. Indeed, all sub-personalities contain a facsimile of the true self. They amplify some vital aspect to suit a situation but sever other parts in the process. These amputated parts lie hidden in the psyche but they are real and necessary. As such, they will sooner or later make their presence felt. In the process, they may create disturbing conflicts within and among dominant sub-personalities.

The less a person is aware of their existence and the interplay between them, the more anxious and agitated he/she becomes. In conflict, sub-personalities will become less and less functional, prompting degrees of dysfunction or depression, perhaps ultimately creating a crisis in the person's physical or emotional health. Just as God is the cause and purpose of our life, breaches in communion with God sap our life of its vitality and result in behaviour that we moralistically call sin, with all its detrimental consequences.

In an article entitled *Spiritual Conflicts and Crises*, Assagioli writes, “(The resolution of conflicts) is a long and complex affair, composed of phases of active purification for removing the obstacles to the inflow and action of the spiritual forces; phases of development of inner faculties which had been latent or feeble; phases during which the personality must stand steady and submissive, allowing itself to be worked upon by the Spirit and bearing the inevitable suffering with courage and patience. It is a period replete with changes, alternations of light and darkness, joy and sorrow.”

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light... Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul.

– 1 Peter 2: 9, 11

JULY-AUGUST 2008

Last month, we considered the effect of woundedness on our life choices. Now, it's time to turn our attention to where true joy is to be found—in the deliberate application of our giftedness to the purpose to which our spiritual identity is ordained. Let's take this one element at a time.

First, aren't we guilty of vanity when we focus on our qualities or talents? For many people, particularly those in their forties or older, the virtue of humility is associated with putting ourselves down. In fact, that's a dangerously inappropriate understanding of humility. The exercise of true humility does not require self-deprecation but enables us to honestly recognize who we are as finite humans. It places us in right relation with one another and with God. It allows us to see ourselves as God sees us. Consequently, humility permits us to know our spiritual identity as God created it, and to live accordingly.

So, in true humility—not false modesty—we can gain a better understanding of who we are. We can gauge not only our limitations but also appreciate the beauty that God has created in us. Not only has he created us “in his image” (Cf. Gen.1:26) but also he has bestowed upon each of us a particular set of capacities and abilities (latent or developed) to perform certain tasks. These are related to our mission, which some call vocation or purpose.

If we understand giftedness, therefore, not as anything that we can boast about but rather as a set of tools that we've been given to do a job, the merit for our talents belongs entirely to God. Therefore, it is not vanity to confess them. Indeed, to acknowledge them without fuss is simply to witness to God's work in our life. Naming our gifts is to express gratitude for his largess and accept the mission to which they are intended. Truthfully, our hesitation in naming our gifts may have less to do with humility than with the obligation that they entail.

God is more anxious to bestow his blessings on us than we are to receive them.

– Augustine of Hippo

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Second, what do we mean by giftedness? Let's begin by stating what it is not. It is not necessarily a skill: skills can be developed to mask woundedness. It is not necessarily a quality that is evident to others or even to us: God-given gifts may be undeveloped, for a host of reasons. It is not even necessarily what brings us pleasure: we examined in previous reflections the difference between pleasure and joy. In each case, I have carefully included the words “not necessarily.” Certainly, a particular skill may correspond to a God-given gift; a gift from God may be evident to others as well as to us; and the use of a gift can bring great pleasure.

Giftedness, as the word is used in relation to joy, is the set of tools that God has provided to live according to our spiritual identity in the achievement of our mission. As we have seen, part of that mission is to love, and it is Christ-centred love that gives us true joy. But it is the particular circumstance in which God calls us to love that enables us to distinguish between gifts and skills. In essence, gifts flow from our true identity. To be connected to our sacred gifts, therefore, we must live authentically. Again, self-knowledge is the key.

Third, how can we know what are genuine, God-given gifts? The answer has two parts: If these are already

deployed, we know them by their fruits; if they are not, we can only surmise their existence indirectly.

For many years, I have provided spiritual direction and counsel to bereaved persons. As part of the process of recovery and growth, I occasionally take them through an exercise of identifying their gifts. This is a difficult process, in part because of their reluctance due to false notions of humility but mostly because they've never before explored the dynamics of their life. I begin by inviting them to list abilities from which they have derived pleasure or for which they have received complements. As we progress, however, some of these are eliminated for reasons noted earlier. What's left is a pretty solid inventory that can be adjusted through ongoing self-discovery.

Latent gifts are more elusive, however. The more we assume false identities and roles, the more inaccessible are these gifts. Fortunately, partial evidence of their presence can often be found. The simplest way is to inventory peak moments in our lives, without regard for their apparent importance or perceived relevance to our existing roles. Such events may have included singing in a children's choir, managing a community project; taking an art course.

The list of possibilities is endless. It may have been set aside because it conflicted with other values, was deemed to be useless or dismissed as frivolous. What will be notable is not only the feeling that we had while undertaking the task but the satisfaction that came after. That consolation can remain dormant for years, even if it was repressed by criticism or ridicule. Recovering repressed or suppressed gifts will be critical for living fully and responding joyfully to God's call.

There are many different gifts, but it is always the same Spirit; there are many different ways of serving, but it is always the same Lord. There are many different forms of activity, but in everybody it is the same God who is at work in them all. The particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the general good. To one is given from the Spirit the gift of utterance expressing wisdom; to another the gift of utterance expressing knowledge, in accordance with the same Spirit; to another, faith, from the same Spirit; and to another, the gifts of healing, through this one Spirit; to another, the working of miracles; to another, prophecy; to another, the power of distinguishing spirits; to one, the gift of different tongues and to another, the interpretation of tongues. But at work in all these is one and the same Spirit, distributing them at will to each individual.

– 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11

SEPTEMBER 2008

Last month, we reflected on giftedness as the link between our spiritual identity and mission. How can we be sure that we are not ignoring gifts from God? There is probably no failsafe way. But it is helpful to take the time to look where gifts may be found. Each human being is a complex construction of elements related to the body, mind and spirit. For starters, we must ensure that we've explored each of these areas for signs of giftedness. God will have blessed us each in unique ways, specifically with regards to our physical abilities, our mental aptitudes and capacities and our spiritual intuitions.

God has gifted us in a manner that brings our identify to life in order to fulfill a purpose, what we sometimes call vocation. We noted that our gifts can be elusive and may need development; the mission itself merits attention as well.

Each of us has a mission in life. All of us share the mission of fostering loving relationships. Our true and particular mission is the authentic expression of our spiritual identity and activates our giftedness, honed by the wheel of woundedness. Very likely, our mission is the ground on which our woundedness will be slowly and mysteriously healed.

We all have a mission. We all have a part in this wondrous dance called life. It may change over time, but there will always be a continuous rhythm. There will always be a familiar melody from the essence of who we are, what we are, where we are and why we are. And, because we have been wounded along the journey, God calls us to restoration through ministry. In a very real way, he calls us to serve others and to be healed by them in the process.

This statement ought not to be confused with acting for the purpose of self-satisfaction. Quite to the contrary, loving service must be our goal. But God's grace provides consolation to those who are faithful to his call. Healing is the fruit of humble service.

Henri Nouwen wrote a book that is based on this very premise. *The Wounded Healer*, which in one edition carries on the front cover these bold words, "In our own woundedness, we can become a source of life for others," argues that ministers—those who serve others, meaning all of us—"are called to identify the suffering in their own heart and make that recognition the starting point of service... (they) must be willing to go beyond their professional, somewhat aloof role and leave themselves open as fellow human being with the same wounds and suffering as those they serve. In other words, we heal from our wounds."

All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence, in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song — but in this dance or in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny.

– Pablo Neruda, *Toward the Splendid City*

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All along my career in corporate communications, I've had occasion to assist organizations of all sizes to determine and articulate their mission in the form of a clear, concise and compelling statement.

This exercise is mandatory, particularly in a commercial, competitive environment. Two things become apparent when doing this work: All missions are common in the basic requirement to meet needs—real or perceived—and to remain viable by earning a profit in the process. At the same time, all missions must be unique in order to provide the organization with a competitive edge over its competitors.

That's not how we view our God-given mission, but the analogy does remind us that our own life's mission has two qualities, shared and unique. Our mission is shared in that we all are called to join in loving communion with God and with one another; to join as one family or one body. Also, we are conferred a particular job within the overall plan, each as unique as a fingerprint.

For example, my general mission is to love. My mission category is to serve the community in God's corporate plan to communicate love. Even more precisely, in all aspects of my ministry, I have a particular role to play in living fraternally by the example of Saint Francis while conveying joy and hope to individuals and groups, in person or through the medium of writing.

Indeed, an individual can develop a mission statement, to focus on a purpose and to make sound choices. It would define how you will live. Though it may evolve somewhat over time, as you learn more about who you are and where your gifts are needed, there will be constant movement toward the greater integration of the authentic aspects of your personality.

In *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton sets out a long series of statements about the Christian mission or vocation. I highlight some of them here because they link mission to true joy.

1. Each of us has some kind of vocation. We are all called by God to share in His life and His Kingdom. This, he argues is the key to happiness because God's is a Kingdom of love (and love ultimately leads to joy).
2. Love is perfect in proportion to its freedom. It is free in proportion to its purity. We act most freely when we act purely in response to the love of God.
3. Every man has a vocation to be someone: but he must understand clearly that in order to fulfill this vocation he can only be one person: himself.
4. Being and doing become one, in our life, when our life and being themselves are a martyrdom for the truth. Our vocation is precisely this: to bear witness to the truth of Christ in preference to our own satisfaction.
5. Therefore asceticism is unavoidable in Christian life. We cannot escape the obligation to deny ourselves.
6. The importance of courageous sacrifice, in accomplishing our work of finding and witnessing to the truth, cannot be overemphasized. We cannot possess the truth fully until it has entered into the very substance of our life by good habits and by a certain perfection of moral activity.
7. Our Father in Heaven has called us each one to the place in which He can best satisfy his infinite desire to do us good.
8. If we are called to the place in which God wills to do us the most good, it means we are called where we can best leave ourselves and find Him. It is a call to the knowledge of God, to the recognition of God as our Father, to joy in the understanding of His mercy.
9. There is something in the depths of our being that hungers for wholeness. Because we are made for eternal life, we are made for an act that gathers up all the powers and capacities of our being and offers them simultaneously and forever to God.
10. Every man in the world is called to teach and to advise and to console some other man, and we are all

bound to pray for one another.

11. All vocations are intended by God to manifest His love in the world. For each special calling gives a man some particular place in the Mystery of Christ, gives him something to do for the salvation of all mankind.

The Word became one of us to reveal the face and heart of God and to lead us all into a loving communion with the Father. His yearning, his prayer is that we all become one in him: each one unique but together in unity to the glory of God.

– Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*

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Merton singles out one particular person to exemplify faithfulness to mission—Francis of Assisi. The stigmatization of Saint Francis was a divine sign of the fact that he was, of all saints, the most Christ-like. This reminds us that all vocations are ultimately meant to be Christ-like in some fashion or other. That is the case, in different states of life—single, married, religious and ordained—and functions—medicine, education, public administration et cetera.

Merton adds, “The remarkable thing about Saint Francis is that in his sacrifice of everything he had also sacrificed all the ‘vocations’ in a limited sense of the word.” This reminds us that what we generally call ‘vocations’ are broad categories. When the right fit for state and function is determined, in a very real way the discernment has only just begun. The toughest judgement to make is what unique role each of us is called to play within these categories. That was the existential question that caused such agitation within Saint Francis until he arrived at familiar conclusions. The validity of these answers would not have been apparent, however, had it not been for the spiritual joy that we so readily associate with the little poor man of Assisi.

Gathering his identity, his giftedness and indeed his woundedness, Saint Francis seized upon his God-given mission and carried it out with authenticity. His tremendous legacy is proof that his life was conformed to that of Christ so perfectly that his mission was His loved Saviour’s mission. Indeed, either literally or figuratively, he preached good news to the poor, proclaimed release to the captives, recovered sight to the blind and set at liberty those who were oppressed. (Cf. Luke 4:18)

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.

– John 15: 5

SEPTEMBER 2008

In 1785, German poet, playwright and historian Friedrich Schiller wrote “To Joy,” which is better known to us today as the words to Ludwig van Beethoven’s fourth and final movement of his Ninth Symphony, completed in 1824. The exuberance of the composer’s magnificent choral symphony rightly lays claim to the title, “Ode to Joy.”

More than 500 years earlier, the little poor man of Assisi, Saint Francis, had already reached the zenith of joy in The Canticle of Creatures, without using that word in any of its verses.

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour,
and all blessing.

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.

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

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

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

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

The vitality of these verses, the opening lines to the first poem written in the vernacular language of the Italian people, leads one to assume that these mystical words were written during a time of jubilation. Though jubilant about God’s love, Saint Francis actually wrote these lines at a time of intense suffering.

He had been betrayed by some of his brothers; the church had significantly altered the rule that had been inspired by his own powerful spiritual intuition; and his body was racked with chronic pain.

One of the most reliable accounts of his life is the Legend of Perugia. In it, we find these revealing words: “During his stay at this friary, for fifty days and more, blessed Francis could not bear the light of the sun during the day or the light of the fire at night. He constantly remained in darkness inside the house in his cell. His eyes caused him so much pain that he could neither lie down nor sleep, so to speak, which was very bad for his eyes and for his health. . . . One night, as he was thinking of all the tribulations which he was enduring, he felt sorry for himself and said interiorly: ‘Lord, help me in my infirmities so that I may have the strength to bear them patiently.’”

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, a Capuchin Franciscan, preacher of the papal household, commented during a meditation given at the Monastery of La Verna: “This was Francis’ Gethsemane, so it is no surprise that he would pray the same prayer as Jesus: ‘Let this chalice pass from me.’” (*St. Francis & the Cross: Reflections on suffering, weakness and joy*)

The Legend continues, “Therefore, for his glory, for my consolation, and the edification of my neighbor, I wish to compose a new ‘Praises of the Lord,’ for his creatures. These creatures minister to our needs every day; without them we could not live; and through them the human race greatly offends the Creator. Every day we fail to appreciate so great a blessing by not praising as we should the Creator and dispenser of all these gifts.”

Saint Francis is the model of true joy because he found it within, undiminished by the circumstances of his life. He found it by embracing God’s love and then returning it through compassion toward all people, particularly lepers and the poor.

He found joy at the peak of his suffering in all things created by God—all things great and small. The natural world filled him with awe and delight. In it, he saw awesome beauty, meaningful order and constantly renewed life. It revealed God, and the systems within creation reminded him of the call to relationship. We are one body. When one member is injured the entire body suffers. Humanity is an ecosystem in which no one is insignificant and everyone deserves respect.

If a wounded member can cause the body to suffer, then it follows that if one member experiences joy, the entire body is transfigured. That, I think, whether intended or not, is Saint Francis’ greatest contribution to our world. In fact, its impact radiated not only across the world then but now as well. The joy of Saint Francis is synonymous with faith, hope and love; with peace and reverence for life; with simplicity, gratitude and generosity.

If painful illness was a form of Gethsemane for Saint Francis, it was also the place of his Resurrection. To his spiritual intuition, death and life occupied the same mystical space. There where darkness seems most intense, light abounds. This becomes apparent in reading a story told in the rather fanciful yet insightful *Little Flowers of Saint Francis*. It refers to a journey taken by him and his beloved confident Brother Leo.

Saint Francis begins by relating to Leo a long series of hypothetical situations in which he affirms what joy is not. His first example, “Brother Leo, even if the Friars Minor in every country give a great example of holiness and integrity and good edification, nevertheless write down and note carefully that perfect joy is

not in that.”

Later, he goes on to provide examples of true or perfect joy that are contrary to human wisdom, ending with this illustration, “And if later, suffering intensely from hunger and the painful cold, with night falling, we still knock and call, and crying loudly beg them to open for us and let us come in for the love of God, and he grows still more angry and says: ‘Those fellows are bold and shameless ruffians. I’ll give them what they deserve!’ And he comes out with a knotty club, and grasping us by the cowl throws us onto the ground, rolling us in the mud and snow, and beats us with that club so much that he covers our bodies with wounds— if we endure all those evils and insults and blows with joy and patience, reflecting that we must accept and bear the sufferings of the Blessed Christ patiently for love of Him, oh, Brother Leo, write: that is perfect joy!”

Finally, knowing that his listener is now confused and perhaps discouraged, he states simply, “And now hear the conclusion, Brother Leo. Above all the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ gives to His friends is that of conquering oneself and willingly enduring sufferings, insults, humiliations, and hardships for the love of Christ.”

Pleasure does not necessarily bring true joy. It is typically ephemeral, and if it is unhealthy, it is often followed by an unpleasant aftertaste or desolation. Conversely, deep and lasting satisfaction can follow difficult periods after which we might say to ourselves in serenity, “That was not fun, but it was the right thing to do.”

Saint Francis’ insight into the power of spiritual joy is really quite staggering. He understood it not only as a reward for virtue but as a deterrent to vice. In a series of admonitions, spiritual counsels on the religious life, he writes, “Where there is poverty and joy there is neither cupidity nor avarice.” In other words, where joy is absent, cupidity grows. Cupidity: inordinate desire. Inordinate desire robs us of the freedom to choose what is in our best interest. It provokes obsessive, compulsive behaviors. Pure desire, on the other hand, leads to true joy. Joy is the freedom to act authentically and lovingly, which brings us evermore joy.

*Land of the Heart’s Desire,
Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,
But joy is wisdom, time an endless song.*

– William Butler Yeats, *The Land of Heart’s Desire*

SEPTEMBER 2008

As a new year approaches, we face the opportunity of making true joy a priority in the form of a few carefully chosen resolutions, each designed to savour its fruits as long as possible.

First, resolve to make simplicity, gratitude and generosity operating principles in your life. Second, devote prayer and effort to an ever-increasing focus on the truth of who you are, your God-given gifts and your life's mission. Third, hold in front of you constantly the following guiding principles, proposed by Simone Pacot, a prolific Protestant author whose refreshing look at the psychological horizon of Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition offers helpful insights to our quest for true joy.

Pacot's premise in *Reviens a la vie!* is that life is both a gift and a choice. God has given it to us; his commandments suppose that we will honour it. At the same time, he gives us free will, which means that we have choices to make to nurture that gift. It is as though he is saying, "I gave you life; be alive." He puts responsibility for the latter partly in our own hands.

1. The choice for Life

Paul is a middle-aged professional who is married to a woman who loves him; together, they have two wonderful children. But Paul knows no joy because he feels false in all his choices and is certain that no one could understand the emptiness that he feels despite an apparently perfect environment. So, he suppresses his feelings and desires.

God both bids us to choose life and warns against choosing its opposite. He invites us to choose the wholesome path and to refuse to become accomplices to death in all its forms, including denial of our spiritual identity, falseness in words and deeds as well as passive or active self-destruction.

In the Book of Deuteronomy (30:15-20), we read, "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore **choose life, that you and your descendants may live**, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

2. Acceptance of our human condition

Mary is a gifted executive who works endless hours to exceed the expectations of everyone around her. In the face of looming defeat, she redoubles her efforts, spreading stress to both her colleagues and family. She is obsessed with the idea that ingenuity and effort can accomplish anything.

To be human is to be finite. To live happily requires acceptance of that reality. The bible explains by means

of an allegory—the story of the first man who, despite abundance, obsesses about what lies beyond human limitation. This story invites us to occupy our rightful place in creation, to recognize the source of life and live plentifully within the bounds without regret, compulsiveness or envy. Similarly, living plentifully means to not limit ourselves through our own mistakes, losses or vulnerability. To live plentifully, we must accept the fact that we are not operating in isolation; we act authentically when we connect to our creator who holds the truth of what is in our best interest. Without God’s wisdom, we are too easily deceived.

In the Book of Genesis (2:16-17), “the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but **of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat**, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’”

3. Deployment of our unique identity in relation to God and others

Ronald is the son of a domineering father and passive mother. As a child, in order to avoid confrontations, he too accepted without questioning his father’s opinions about his own abilities, preferences and dreams; what has value and what contributes to happiness. As an adult, Ronald is unhappy.

During his epic walk with God, the father of the three traditional monotheistic religions learns important lessons about who he is. His family, friends and neighbours know him as Abram. (Gen. 2:1) In the name Abram is contained the totality of what others assume to be his personality, aptitudes, weaknesses and destiny. Consequently, that is who he thinks he is. But that is not the name by which God knows him. It is not the spiritual identity that God had in mind from the beginning. To discover it, he must leave the land of his ancestors, and follow God’s leadership to assume his rightful place and name, Abraham. (Gen. 17:5)

In the Book of Revelation (2:17), God says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with **a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.**”

4. Quest for unity of the person inhabited by the living God

People who know her say that Helen is a different person in different circumstances—at work, at home, among friends. She often changes jobs, frequently regretting choices that she’s made in the past. Asked for her preferences regarding anything from food to music to vacation destinations, she cannot decide. Helen is often anxious.

Before the time of Jesus, the Jewish people had hundred of sanctions and laws that had to be obeyed to the letter. They would understandably think that winning God’s favour would be difficult, if not impossible. They would become discouraged if it were not for the social pressure to conform as much as possible, bearing the guilt of their transgressions. Jesus reminded them that the ancient Law (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18) contains two priorities: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10:27) In other words, joy depends on our being reconciled with our true identity, our creator and creation. Joy depends on our consciousness of God’s spirit dwelling within us and teaches us the ways of truth and love: “Do you not know that **you are God’s temple** and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

We are reminded that as God is one in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are one in body, mind and soul. Our joy is in the unity of our person animated by God’s truth and love. We breach this law when

we become fragmented or obsessed with one aspect of our being at the exclusion of others. Unity calls for reconciliation and balance.

5. Life as fecundity

Peter lacks confidence and believes that we are made happy by our clever avoidance of risk. He assumes his abilities are average as he has never been encouraged to develop these. His option for safety always diverts him from the exploration of his latent talents. His greatest fear is the potential of loss.

God's plan has always been creative. God charges us with the role of co-creator, collaborators in the building of an awesome kingdom of love: "And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" (Gen. 1:28)

Joy comes, therefore, from living as blessed by God, embraced by the Risen One; living "productively" (but not necessarily according to the world's limited definition of that word); to receive God's love, to live in it and to share it with others. We transgress this law of joy when we refuse God's gifts or refuse to develop them. We deny life when we undervalue or repress God's gifts.

While the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-21) is familiar to us, it would be profitable to meditate on its message as we conclude this reflection on the laws on joy.

[The kingdom of heaven] will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, **to each according to his ability**. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, **I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.**'"

DECEMBER 2008

Spiritual joy is an otherworldly joy that is experienced in this world. For a Christian, it is the crown of grace that Jesus places upon our head for surrendering our heart to his wisdom and watching his footsteps.

To paraphrase the words of Saint Peter's First Letter (1:22-23), by obedience to the truth (Christ) you have purified yourself for a genuine love for your brothers; therefore, love one another constantly from the heart (pure affection). Your rebirth (joy) has come, not from a destructible seed (lust) but an indestructible one (compassion), through the living and enduring word of God (contemplation). The word lust here is used in its broadest sense.

Lust that is a barrier to joy is not only an inordinate way of looking at our body and those of others but also a self-serving way of thinking about the material world. It enslaves us to unhealthy or stunted visions of things, including our own physical being. True joy is the fruit of Christ-like love. Therefore, it marks our liberation from false images of who we are, what we are and why we are.

Like peace, joy is both a journey and a destination. Its purest form is a beatific vision but the process of building a kingdom of peace and true joy offers its own rewards. We sow tiny seeds. We water and weed, and we watch as God manages the rest. Where there is hatred, ours is to sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. His is to grow these and add blossoms of peace and joy.

Each step in the direction of joy, which is love, is taken on the way of truth and life. It suffers no lies. Nor is the sojourner strained by selfishness. Rather, God's own Holy Spirit invigorates him.

Despite our psyche's inclinations and compulsions, God's Spirit invites us to divest our heart of unwholesome burdens. The journey to joy progresses most efficiently, therefore, with purity, which is not perfection. It is the direction in which we face that matters—the deepest desire of our heart and the willingness to slowly discard distractions.

Thomas A Kempis wrote, "A man is raised up from the earth by two wings—simplicity and purity. There must be simplicity in his intention and purity in his desires. Simplicity leads to God, purity embraces and enjoys him." We may conclude that true joy rises in us when our life is focused on what produces it, namely true love, and when our heart is liberated from unhealthy desire, which would in effect be either isolation or selfishness.

If your heart is free from ill-ordered affection, no good deed will be difficult for you. If you aim at and seek after nothing but the pleasure of God and the welfare of your neighbor, you will enjoy freedom within.

– Thomas A Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*

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Spiritual joy requires discipline. It needs effort to set an appropriate course and to avoid circumstances that are antithetical to true joy. As Henri Nouwen writes in *Dispelling the Darkness*, "It requires choosing for the light even when there is much darkness to frighten me, choosing for life even when the forces of earth are

so visible, and choosing for the truth even when I am surrounded with lies.” Nouwen adds, “The reward of choosing joy is joy itself. Joy never denies the sadness, but transforms it to a fertile soil for more joy.”

Make progress a deliberate exercise, always avoiding heroic plans that are bound to fail and frustrate future efforts. Focus on four aspects of life: physical, emotional, social and spiritual. Strive to keep balance between these. Set achievable goals each week, and figure out how to reach them.

First, the physical. William James wrote, “Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by little gracious exercises every day.” If you are totally inactive, a walk around the block would be a reasonable first step. Later you may consider longer outings. If you once were active in sports, resume activity at a modest level. Remember always to avoid setting yourself up for disappointment. Reward yourself for small successes.

Reflecting on the Resurrection of Christ, Tom Ryan, who writes periodically on the vital link between physical wellbeing and spirituality, commented in a 2005 article, “The more attuned we become to the flesh God embraced and in which God dwells, exulting in its harmony, strength, and flexibility, learning how to bear its tensions and sufferings gracefully, the more we glorify our Savior who rose from the dead, wounds and all, and chose to call it ‘home.’”

Second, emotional. Saint Francis wrote, “Evil cannot attain a person who possesses joy.” Figure out what gives you joy and plan for it. Plan to avoid things that sap your joy. You will find joy comes more easily if you deal with emotional obstacles and are honest about your feelings. Your plan may be to talk to a friend or a therapist about something that troubles you. You will want to share with others your appreciation of small beautiful things that are observed in the normal course of living.

We cannot avoid painful situations entirely, but we can take steps to reduce their power to impair our joy. Increasing our capacity for self-esteem and gratitude can help to ward off anger and pain in the future. Gratitude can also widen the horizon of personal growth. In time, we can develop an attitude that finds grace in all situations, including difficult ones. According to Dr. Francis Lu, “What gratitude does for you is as important as what it does for others. It calms your fears, strengthens your courage, opens your heart for adventure – gratefulness heals.”

Third, social. Benjamin Disraeli wrote, “We are all born to love; it is the principle of existence and its only end.”

We all have a need to belong, to share our life with others in a fully human community. Jean Vanier who understands humanity’s deep loneliness wrote, “The longer we journey on the road to inner healing and wholeness, the more the sense of belonging grows and deepens. The sense is not just one of belonging to others and to a community. It is a sense of belonging to the universe, to the earth, to the air, to the water, to everything that lives, to all humanity. If the community gives a sense of belonging, it also helps us to accept our aloneness in a personal meeting with God. Through this, the community is open to the universe and to humankind.” (*Community and Growth*)

Fourth, spiritual. Carl Jung wrote, “None of my patients has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook.”

At critical moments in our lives, questions about God arise almost inevitably—either for or against. Often

we turn to the religious traditions of our youth for solace and hope. If we are open-minded about them, we discover in our heart what Ron Rolheiser called “a holy longing.” In time, we discover the link between life, freedom and joy. In an interview, Rolheiser commented, “As John of the Cross says in his poem, a good spiritual life is geared to help you escape from self-centeredness. You walk away from your heartaches, your headaches and your restlessness; that’s the true freedom. John would have a very different interpretation of freedom than our culture does.”

I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

– John 10: 10

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Throughout 2008, our Franciscan reflections have focused on finding true joy. First, we strove to understand its meaning within the Christian tradition, distinguishing it from pleasure and linking it to love. Then, we explored various avenues, particularly finding transcendent joy through a life of simplicity, gratitude and generosity, and by discovering our unique identity, giftedness and mission. Finally, we resolved to live according to spiritually based life principles and making life-affirming choices in the physical, emotional, social and spiritual realms.

Above all, let us remember that while joy is elusive, it is not abstract or illusory. It is perhaps the most concrete human experience. It is built on the solid foundation of authenticity, which ultimately is only possible once we become most fully human by transcending the limits of our ego and engaging in genuinely loving relationships. The difficulty that we have in grasping and maintaining joy is a measure of our woundedness and fear. Over time, these have bound us to false identities, misunderstandings about our giftedness and ambiguity about our mission. That is why the most vital of life’s tasks is our struggle to accept God’s gift of freedom—freedom to know ourselves truthfully, freedom to be fully alive, and freedom to make good choices. This is Christ’s greatest gift to humanity.

Freedom is what we have—Christ has set us free! Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourself to become slaves again.

– Galatians 5: 1

2 | ABUNDANT LIFE

JANUARY 2009

Ego sum via, veritas et vita. This familiar verse rises like incense above the altar in Saint Dominique in a section of Paris known as the 14th *arrondissement*, just near the famed Latin Quarter, so-called for its Roman and scholarly roots. As I recall this image, I am still struck by its freshness, almost 20 years later. It urged me then to paint again, time permitting. It evoked in my imagination a triptych, which would depict the mystery of faith, hope and love against a paschal canvas of passion, death and resurrection. For me, this verse said all that needed to be said about abundant life.

I am the way, the truth, and the life, said Jesus.

I believe that *the way* is what Jesus re-discovered in the desert and re-confirmed in the long night of Gethsemane, just as we discover – against all human logic – the way, which leads to truth in anguish. I believe that *truth* is what Jesus revealed in the darkness of Golgotha, just as we find the truth about life in our losses. And, I believe that *reallife* is what Jesus was raised to on Easter morning, just as we are crowned with new life through faith, hope and love; through trust, confidence and solidarity; through simplicity, gratitude and generosity.

The *way* is the only way, which leads to fulfillment. The way is not an optional route, a scenic tour along a rugged coastline. The way is the only way. The word *the* stands as a sort of pedestal upon which we place that which is unique. The way is not a paved road. Along the way are countless difficulties and painful challenges. In *Paradise Lost*, the English poet John Milton wrote: “Long is the way and hard, that out of hell leads up to light.” The way is the way of the tree of life, the way of the cross.

The *truth* is the only way, which leads to peace. The evangelist John tells us bluntly, “The truth shall make you free.” Only the truth can make you free. The 16th Century English poet Sir Walter Raleigh underscored this simple reality in his poem *The Lie*.

Go, Soul, thy body's quest,
Upon a thankless errant:
Fear not to touch the best,
The truth shall be thy warrant.

Recognizing the fact that truth is vital to lasting inner peace is easy. Recognizing truth itself is not. Perhaps history's most notable waffler was the Roman governor of Judah, Pontius Pilate, who asked philosophically “What is truth?”, and then shrank cowardly from a decisive moment in history because he lacked the wherewithal to discern truth from deception, life from death. Pity the man who cannot see truth. Truth is all that is truly beautiful and grand. Beauty inspired the English poet John Keats to affirm in *Ode to a Grecian Urn*:

“Beauty is truth and truth beauty”, — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Another poet, James Russell Lowell, reminds us that Providence dwells in truth.

Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne –

Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

The *life* is the only way that leads to joy. Jesus said that he came so that we may enjoy life to the hilt.

Jesus did more than reveal *the way, the truth and the life*. Indeed, he embodied those realities—and still does today, in a mystical manner. Bonaventure certainly saw Jesus as *the way, the truth and the life*. In his book *The Journey to the Mind of God*, we read:

Christ is both the way and the door. Christ is the staircase and the vehicle, like the *throne of mercy over the Ark of the Covenant and the mystery hidden from the ages*. A man should turn his full attention to this throne of mercy, and should gaze at him hanging on the cross, full of faith, hope and charity, devoted, full of wonder and joy, marked by gratitude, and open to praise and jubilation. Then such a man will make with Christ a pasch, that is, a passing over. Through the branches of the cross, he will pass over the Red Sea, leaving Egypt and entering the desert. There he will taste the hidden manna, and rest with Christ in the sepulcher, as if he were dead to things outside. He will experience, as much as possible for one who is still living, what was promised to the thief who hung beside Christ: *Today you will be with me in paradise*.

For this pass-over to be perfect we must suspend all the operations of the mind and we must transform the peak of our affections, directing them to God alone. This is a sacred mystical experience. No one can comprehend it unless he surrenders himself to it; nor can he surrender himself to it unless he longs for it; nor can he long for it unless the Holy Spirit, whom Christ sent into the world, should come and inflame his innermost soul. Hence the Apostle says that this mystical wisdom is revealed by the Holy Spirit.

If you ask how such things can occur, seek the answer in God's grace, not in doctrine; in the sighs of prayer, not in research; seek the bridegroom not the teacher; God and not man; darkness not daylight; and look not to the light but rather to the raging fire that carries the soul to God with intense fervor and glowing love. The fire is God, and the furnace is in Jerusalem, fired by Christ in the ardor of his loving passion. Only he understood this who said: *My soul chose hanging and my bones death*. Anyone who cherishes this kind of death can see God, for it is certainly true that: *No man can look upon me and live*.

Let us die, then, and enter into the darkness, silencing our anxieties, our passions and all the fantasies of our imagination. Let us pass over with the crucified Christ *from this world to the Father*, so that when the Father has shown himself to us, we can say with Philip: *It is enough*. We may say with Paul: *My grace is sufficient for you; and we can rejoice with David, saying: My flesh and my heart fail me, but God is the strength of my heart and my heritage forever. Blessed be the Lord forever, and let the people say: Amen. Amen!*

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In our infancy, fantasy was a necessary shield to protect us against the harshness of naked truth. This protection came in such forms as stuffed animals with ascribed human qualities or imaginary friends. However, later in life, fantasy becomes a barrier to growth and development. Fantasy evolves and takes on

colours that excite adult emotions and seemingly soothe aching spirits. Yet, the excitement and the relief are ephemeral. Sadly, fantasy only masks the symptoms of pain and is impotent against its underlying causes. It creates a cycle of dependency because it prolongs the recovery and postpones indefinitely the real healing that can only occur in Reality.

Fantasy is a detour from the life-giving way. It is the stealth siren that lures us onto fatal shoals. It is a prism that distorts misery and deflects it as pleasure. Fantasy is a false counsel that dignifies vice as virtue. Fantasy is the shroud that obscures the limits of desolation and consolation. Fantasy is the antithesis of truth. It is the chief instrument of the infamous Purveyor of Falsehood and Fear. Fantasy is the antithesis of Freedom. Fantasy is the antithesis of holiness, which invites us to wholesomeness and authenticity through presence and gratitude.

Fantasy is the enemy of life. It is a cowardly retreat from Reality. Fantasy is a gleaming veneer disguising ravaged timbers. It is a denial of eternity and an affirmation of defeat. On the other hand, as Scripture tells us clearly, the truth will set us free and give us a share in Jesus' victory over death. In effect, we can have our cake and eat it too: truth and consequences. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord who is with us in the darkness and envelops us in the flame of love with warmth that only the heart can feel and a brilliance that only the soul can see.

Abundant life is a rose, so joyfully beautiful. It is a grace, so rich and delicious, that God gives to his friends. He is the way to abundant life; he is its truth.

FEBRUARY 2009

Life is nothing more than potentiality; living is the concrete reality. What does it mean to live to our full potential, to live abundantly? Practically, it means overcoming a long series of intractable obstacles related to the mind and the heart as well as the spirit. These obstacles would otherwise confine us to false or dwarfed versions of who we are.

Woundedness can lock us into destructive patterns such as co-dependency and envy. As a result, many of us lack the freedom that is necessary to abundance.

What does Christian Scripture tell us about liberation from fear and inauthenticity? Essentially, we are invited to take our cue from God. God's will is presented as supreme. To many of us, this is a frightening proposition. Too often we have understood God's will as being in opposition to our own. That is a false perception. God's will is incompatible with the impulses of our false self but not of our true self. When Jesus consented to do his Father's will during the terrifying night before he died, he was simply acknowledging that the action to follow was the only course that would be coherent with his abiding identity and steadily unfolding mission.

It is our wounded nature that causes us to resist any consideration of will other than that of our ego. Deference to God seems unsafe for reasons that we can't quite articulate. But, in effect, we fear that God's will would pulverize our individuality, deny our deepest desires, and ostracize us from our friends. It is as though we did not accept the basic truth that our individuality comes from God. Our deepest desires, as distinct from cravings, are also from God. Above all, God has created us precisely for meaningful and loving relationships.

Far from being something to fear, God's will is filled with promise. Recall the words of Saint Paul: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declared the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' (Jeremiah 29:11)

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"The will of God is for everyone with life to live," affirms Simone Pacot ("La Volonté de Dieu" in *L'évangélisation des profondeurs*) Pacot's work makes an important contribution to our understanding of what it means to have a well-adjusted relationship to ourselves, to others and to the ultimate Other.

While seeking the creator's will is indispensable to living, argues Pacot, it is not as frightful a task as we often think. If for many the search is tormenting, the torment does not come from God. May we never lose sight of God's own solemn declaration, spoken of his chosen community: "You shall be called My Delight Is in Her." (Is. 62:4) "My Delight" is an apt translation of God's will. In other words, God's desire is that we become his joy, and his joy is not achieved at the expense of ours.

God has a plan for creation in general. This has been made clear throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition. To do the will of God, therefore, is to make a personal contribution to that plan, not as an isolated

contractor but as a fully engaged citizen of the community of Love for which this project was designed. Its construction is more of a project than a program. We are invited to make it vibrant by living in it authentically and abundantly. Consequently, God's will cannot exist in contradiction to our most authentic desires. Pure desire, free of distortions caused by woundedness, is the heartbeat of abundant life.

Needs are not insignificant, nor is what we learn from our woundedness. Food and healing are necessary and demand appropriate attention. But when Jesus said that "one does not live by bread alone" (Matt. 4: 4), he was acknowledging a different order of "need," that of living authentically and for a purpose that transcends mere satisfaction.

Some would deny themselves what is vital to abundant life for fear of living without the usual trappings of security. Others would feel that they are not worthy of entertaining desires, perhaps having been ridiculed for merely "dreaming." Still others fondle desires but put them down as quickly, as though they were games that we play to amuse or distract ourselves. Finally, some will have been hurt along the way of discerning, formulating and actualizing their deepest desires, and have recoiled.

Along the path of abundant life are a number of traps that would prevent us from proceeding. These include fear of failure and depreciation of the present moment. Many of us are afraid of failing, of losing ground, or of just being different. We hesitate, waiting for obstacles to be magically dismantled or for irrefutable proof of God's will to be unveiled. So we follow arbitrary rules and find comfort in these. Meanwhile, diverting our attention from the present, we are unavailable to the evolving and pragmatic expressions of real desires. We distort the true nature of hope, which is vital to our well being. We, in effect, run the risk of what some would call pathological hope, indulging in idealization fantasies about the past or the future. When this occurs, it can be a sign of fear and resistance to indications of God's will.

Essentially, living according to God's will is to live each moment, as much as possible, in the light of the Holy Spirit. This calls for consciousness and flexibility. Consciousness is to be aware of what is going on within and around us in minute details, understanding their impact on our lives and the consequences of our choices. Flexibility is needed to avoid automatic or impulsive reactions that would be generated by our woundedness if we did not act decisively to give expression to our giftedness and sense of higher purpose.

Blindness and sight are powerful themes in Gospel accounts of Jesus' mission. It is significant, I think, that before healing the blind Bartimaeus, he asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51) Jesus can see that the man is blind but defers to Bartimaeus' own desire. Jesus honours his choice because blindness represented the most intractable obstacle to living abundantly and Bartimaeus genuinely desired "to see and follow Jesus." In a way, the physical blindness was incidental. The real miracle was that Bartimaeus touched the core of his deepest desire: "Your faith has made you well."

Let us become engaged in no longer living alone, dependent solely on our own abilities as orphans, but to always live in reference to the Word, guided by the Holy Spirit.

(Rough translation of Simone Pacot, L'évangélisation des profondeurs)

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God's will is to liberate us so that we can live in peace even in the most complicated and difficult situations.

The operative word here is “live,” not merely survive. Our potential is never diminished by challenges and setbacks. But in such circumstances, it is in greater need of grace and of God’s reminder of the basics, who we are, how we are to be and why, as individuals endowed with a unique set of gifts and desires, and designed to bloom in a particular set of circumstances. That’s why anxiety and envy are so threatening. Anxiety causes us to doubt or underutilize our gifts and to formulate desires that are, in reality, expressions of emotional need. Envy has us prefer to use our gifts in other people’s circumstances. “If only” becomes a paralyzing refrain.

It is almost impossible to elude tendencies toward anxiety and envy. Typically, the first is rooted in childhood events involving parents and the second concerning siblings. We are all, therefore, predisposed to, but not condemned to, anxiety and envy. A tendency and an action are different things. Severing the tie between the two is precisely the conversion to which we are called emotionally; to rise from the shadow. Snares laid in our subconscious can limit our freedom but they need not determine the course of our life. The wisdom of God is to have us focus on healthy living rather than obsess about our limitations. The fullness of life was at our birth, is in our present and will always be God’s will and promise.

Anxiety is the turbulence caused by toxic memories, repressed feelings and unspecified fears. We all have them to a degree. The only way to reduce their effect is to go to their source. That requires patience and courage as well as the encouragement of a trusted companion: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” (Is. 43:2)

Envy gives rise to rivalry, jealousy, resentment and even violence. That is why the last of God’s key interdictions, the Ten Commandment, warn us against submitting to temptations involving envy: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” Covetousness is allowing ourselves to be charmed, hypnotized. In other words, we are called to reality and warned against the insidious “what if” fantasy. Gratitude, essential to joy, is always to be found in reality, never in fantasy.

From the moment when we begin to collaborate with the Holy Spirit, we leave the path of death, inertia and self-destruction. We embark upon the path of life, movement, reconstruction and resurrection.

(Pacot, *L'évangélisation des profondeurs*)

MARCH 2009

Living fully and abundantly takes courage. It requires bravery in the face of ubiquitous obstacles, perseverance where endurance is tested, and steadfastness amid doubts that are ever-present. Above all, it requires fortitude to overcome oneself. This task is daunting. Arguably it is impossible without God. That is why we are well advised to heed the often-repeated words of Christ, “Be not afraid.”

The words “full” and “abundant”—like “eternal”—in relation to life, refer to its depth, breath and intensity, not its ease. In fact, almost axiomatically, one could say that the easy life is neither full nor fulfilling. Living abundantly requires risk-taking, overcoming failure, persevering despite occasional discouragement, and having faith in life while struggling with fear and self-doubt.

Jesus’ disciples were intent on following Jesus because, as Peter discovered, only he had the words of eternal life. Only he made sense of absurd circumstances in life. Only he offered the possibility of fulfilling the deepest desire of the human heart. Yet they were fearful.

In chapter six of John’s Gospel, we read of an incident in which they were rowing across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum. They had been waiting for Jesus when a storm arose. Then they saw Jesus walking on the turbulent water, coming near to the boat, and they were terrified. Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid.”

Matthew’s version also has Peter speaking up to say, “Lord, if it is really you, order me to come out on the water to you.” This is an intriguing acknowledgement that friendship with Jesus involves risk but also the possibility of extraordinary outcomes. Along the way, Peter’s confidence flags and he begins to sink. He cries out, “Save me Lord!” Salvation here has many meanings.

Mark’s account adds yet another dimension. After bidding the disciples to have courage and not be afraid, Jesus gets into the boat and the storm dissipates. Then Mark adds, “The disciples were completely amazed, because they had not understood the real meaning of the feeding of the five thousand; their minds could not grasp it.” There is a clear link here between courage and understanding, understanding and abundant life.

Evidentially, to gain a new perspective, one must change vantage points. That means leaving our zone of comfort in order to explore ideas and circumstances that are unfamiliar. According to an adage, only a fool would do the same thing in the same way over and over again and expect a different outcome. But as well, only a fool would wander randomly through the unknown. A wise person always takes a guide.

And that is part of Jesus’ message for abundant life as well. He urges us to not be afraid and, almost in the same breath, to follow him.

Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest.

– Refrain from Be Not Afraid by Robert J. Dufford, SJ

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The spiritual journey has always called for courage in the Lord. After the death of Moses, the Lord gave

Joshua a series of instructions, and then said, “Remember that I have commanded you to be determined and confident! Don’t be afraid or discouraged for I, the Lord your God, am with you where you go.”

The prophets too needed courage and openly proclaimed its necessity. God told Isaiah that the road to holiness is perilous but “tell everyone who is discouraged, ‘Be strong and don’t be afraid! God is coming to your rescue, coming to punish your enemies.’” When God called Jeremiah, the prophet was reticent: “I don’t know how to speak; I am too young.” These were excuses. No doubt Jeremiah was afraid of how people would regard and treat him. The Lord reassured him, “Do not be afraid of them, for I will be with you to protect you.”

Indeed, courage is essential. Equally obvious is the reality that you just can’t command courage. It must rest on something solid, something that instills confidence. That is why the Lord offers his presence and protection: “Grass withers and flowers fade, but the word of our God endures forever.” (Is. 40:8) That is why we need daily reminders. To help us, Scripture is filled with references to God’s constant commitment. Altogether, the Bible has as many allusions to it as there are days in a year.

They will never be hungry or thirsty. Sun and desert heat will not hurt them, for they will be led by one who loves them. He will lead them to springs of water.

– Isaiah 49:10

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The caution against fear is not only related to its potential for blocking the road to spiritual growth. Fear can also lead to decline and drive us to sin. Sin is the enemy of abundant life. It is a kind of moral pathology and a psychological handicap. Fear, in one form or another, is present in all sins. Indeed, fear takes many forms. One need only think of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—physiological needs, safety needs, needs of love, affection and belongingness needs, needs for esteem and needs for self-actualization. Each category—indeed each need within these categories—represents a fear, either in the form of a fear of not having it met or the fear of losing whatever currently satisfies that need. Fear stands behind lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride, each of which, in some way or another, reveals regret or anxiety about unfulfilled needs.

A bigger problem with any consideration of needs is that they can be either real or perceived. The world, if not the evil one, deliberately plays on the confusion that surrounds needs. It plays on fear to persuade us that we need far more possessions, power and prestige than we really do. The only antidote to this constant pressure is to change the frame. The question is not what we need but what we lack. The answer is “very little,” or maybe “nothing.” What we do lack is very often offered at no cost by our loving God.

To receive what God offers requires communion. It is a spiritual meal shared in the intimacy of mutual self-giving. Such a relationship is not merely the pinnacle of faith; it is the ground on which everything occurs. Otherwise, even the exercise of virtue and the avoidance of vice is a struggle. Without God, self-reliance takes the place of grace, and self-righteousness replaces mutuality as the path of holiness. Only joy in the Lord displaces fear. Self-reliance merely suppresses it.

The culture of the world would have us believe that our intellect is equal to all mystery; that our science

is up to the most daunting challenge of nature; that ingenuity can solve any riddle. Its mortal sin is the fantasy of omnipotence—the conceit of each person being the only god that any person would ever need. The problem is that our vain attempts to control our world, our community, indeed ourselves often result in failure. The injury that results produces fear. Eventually, all lust and pride produces fear.

Society is fixated on “quality of life,” which it defines as pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding. It confounds easy roads with idyllic destinations. It presents pleasure as the mark of goodness and pain as evidence of evil. It is enough to confuse anyone. This is at best a naive mirage; at worst, an exploitative deceit. The tenets of much of what we call civilization are in fact dehumanizing and dispiriting.

In his biography of Saint Francis, Saint Bonaventure comments on his tremendous courage, which the poverello opposed to fear: “In the fervent fire of his charity he strove to emulate the glorious triumph of the holy martyrs in whom the flame of love could not be extinguished nor courage be weakened.” The reference to martyrdom here encompasses all manner of renunciations that are associated with spiritual development. Growth inevitably involved loss, which often deters us from progress. We are unwilling to pay the price because the price scares us. Fear stands between the ego and the true self.

Love displaces fear. Referring to the Presentation of the Lord after his birth, Saint Bonaventure counsels, “Rejoice, then, with that blessed old man and the aged Anna; walk forth to meet the mother and Child. Let love overcome your bashfulness; let affection dispel your fear. Receive the Infant in your arms and say with the bride: I took hold of him and would not let go. Dance with the holy man and sing with him. Now dismiss your servant, Lord, according to your word in peace.”

This is where the paths converge. An unloved life is joyless. An unloved life is fearful. Love is life. God is love and God is life. Joy is the fruit of love and our joy is in God who gives us life. Abundant life is a loving life. True joy is the cause and effect of a fulfilling life. A loving life is an instrument of peace and joy.

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

– 1 John 4: 18

The foundation of religious belief is existence—beginning with God. When Moses asked God what name he should use to speak of him, God replied, “I am who I am... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14) For us as well, nothing is more real than the fact that “I am.” Franciscan spirituality begins with a confession that we can only say that because of God.

We know that we exist because of the life that we have been given by God. The Book of Genesis reveals the provenance of life as we know it in Creation. Though it is neither a historical nor a scientific account, the basic truth found in Genesis is not diminished by that fact.

The basic principle is that only life can create. Only what is can be at the source of what will be. If we speak of eternal life it is because it always was—always in the eternal present. I AM has always been and always will be. Our being is a share of God’s being.

God is life itself. All life contains a share of his identity. God created all life from his own. For that reason, we are said to have been created in his image: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:12). I AM is the divine Be-ing from which each male and female human be-ing derives his or her dignity.

It is not surprising then that this dignity is inherent, meaning that it cannot be altered by anything that we do or that is done to us. At the core God’s seed of goodness is never removed, not even by the vilest crime—which is not to say that sin cannot compromise our capacity for living fully out of our God-given potential. It must always be our conviction that what God created was, is and will always be good.

The story of God’s creation of all that is seen and unseen is the greatest love story of all times. We often attribute this title to the verse found in John’s Gospel, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (3:16) As wondrous as this act was, I think of it as a continuation of this spontaneous giving that began at creation when the unfathomable love within the a Trinity erupted in the most magnificent display of fireworks ever—life dazzling the heavens with multitudinous colors and effects.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

– Genesis 1: 31

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The denial of divinely inspired existence, of God’s Spirit living within us, is what we call in our moral tradition “sin.” We understand, and perhaps always have, that we can kill life by attacking the heart and the mind as well as the body. Sin is a form of killing—present both as murder and as suicide. We harm others, to lesser or greater degrees, by denying the fullness of their existence in one manner or another. We harm ourselves in the same way.

We damage life, both our own and that of others, anytime we deny the truth of a person and project falseness. We do that whenever we manipulate, deprive, intimidate or exploit another. We do so also

whenever we live in fear and with false personalities.

Life is not a commodity to be used for gain or discarded at will. It is sacred. From our Judeo-Christian creation story, we learn that the life of each human being comes from God's own breath—his Spirit: “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Gen. 2:7) This fact alone has huge implications for us, for our relationship to God and for our relationship to one another. It speaks to the very nature and purpose of life.

That's why the notion of sin is never outmoded, even if the word is. It is perhaps more relevant than ever as people in our society struggle desperately to find meaning for their lives. Having rejected traditional categories, many follow illusory paths or simply resign themselves to its apparent absurdity. Perhaps more than ever, beings are dehumanized, which is to say devalued of their God-given dignity.

Sin has been around as long as humans have because of free will. Free will is a wonderful gift from God. It enables us to love authentically as he does. But it also exposes us to enormous perils, most of which are unknown to us until we find ourselves in the depths of one abyss or another. Again, if we refer to the creation of humans as described in the Book of Genesis, we find that “out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Many people tend to forget that good and evil were present “in the midst of the garden” from the beginning. That is significant. Man did not create evil. Evil was always the antithesis of good, and free will always allowed it to be an option chosen. Good is a choice; it is the path of love. Evil is a choice too; it is the denial of love. What confuses us easily is that this denial of love presents a seductive face, either in the form of avoidance of some difficulty that is necessary to the expression of love or as the quest for some fleeting pleasure that gratifies the ego or the false self.

Most of us spend precious little time reflecting on our lives because we don't feel that questions of good and evil don't have much to do with our daily lives. We are clearly not evil people. We do good from time to time. So the knowledge of good and evil is easily dismissed as unimportant. If we thought about it, we'd probably say that it was learned as a child or is already “known” to our conscience. This failure to assume responsibility for living fully is frankly stifling. It stunts the blossoming of life and leaves us vulnerable to all sorts of destructive outcomes. It is for this reason that Scripture is clear about our need to claim and invest our identity, giftedness and mission.

And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.'

– Matthew 25: 22-23

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Much of our life is spent woefully deploring our inability to lead fulfilling lives. We cite countless reasons for living out of a small part of our potential. We readily blame a variety of external forces: our parents, our children, our job, our community, our country, our world, even our luck. Often God gets a share of

the blame. While it is certainly true that there are always obstacles, fulfillment is not as elusive as we might think. It is the result of knowing ourselves, respecting our own identity and giftedness, overcoming fear and the pain of woundedness in order to courageously embrace of our life's mission.

Our mission is precisely to live fully. The familiar story of the arc makes that apparent, describing fullness of life as fruitfulness. We are told, "Noah walked with God." (Gen. 9:8) After the great flood that washed away the sin of the world, "God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'" (Gen. 9:1) The command to "multiply" here means to act in a manner that is generative. It means collaborating with him in the creative energy or project of love.

To be truly fruitful, to live fully out of our giftedness and mission, our "I am" must be connected to God's. The most notable example of this is Jesus' identification with his (our) heavenly Father: "The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. (John 17:22-23) Another is Saint Paul's who wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 1:20)

The marriage of my "I am" to God's is also exemplified by two monumental biblical personages—Moses and Mary. Both were called by God, as we all are. The power of their response stems from their courageous, "Here I am." It begins with an affirmation of life and concludes with a communication of that life with its source: I am in communion with the author of life itself, even though the call to union may elicit some fear in my heart. That is the glory of the gesture, that it be deliberate despite the understandable hesitation.

When called by God out of the burning bush, Moses replies, "Here I am." (Exodus 3:4) I imagine this said in a variety of ways—Here, I AM or Here I am or Here I am—each having a different nuance. In any case, Moses is resisting the temptation to say, "Leave me alone. I don't want to speak to you." Mary has her own formula: "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it done according to you word." (Luke 1:38) Connecting my "I am" to God's is key to fulfilling my life's mission and, therefore, feeling fulfilled.

To hear God's word and say, "Here I am" leads to a new sense of who I am. I discover which I am in that relationship with God.

– Timothy Radcliffe, *Why Go to Church?*

Life comes from God. The ability to live abundantly comes from God's Holy Spirit.

Read and reflect upon the words of the prophet Ezekiel (37:1-14),

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Again he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.

Jesus, in promising to send his Holy Spirit, was pointing the way to abundant life. He was saddened to see people in his day—and also in ours—who hang between life and death for lack of spiritual vitality. The prevalence of depression is staggering nowadays. So too is the incidence of narcissism, cynicism and fatalism in family, community and national life. These hang over us like dense dark clouds blocking the necessary rays of the sun. With time, dreams fade, people wither and hearts chill.

Yet, God gave us a bag full of gifts in the Holy Spirit who travels across artificial boundaries and arbitrary obstacles to replace mediocrity with excitement, full instead of dwarfed life. There where there is danger, God's Holy Spirit offers wisdom; where there is confusion, understanding; where there is error, right judgment; where there is fear, courage; where there is ignorance, knowledge; where there is abuse, reverence; and where there is cynicism, wonder and awe.

God wants to give me as much of Godself as is possible.

– William Barry, *A Friendship Like No Other*

Welcoming the breath (spir) of God that fills us increases the capacity of our spiritual lungs. Its aim is far more than survival—its purpose is the joyful hope that fuels authentically loving relationships. It breathes life into families and communities. It restores enthusiasm, transforms the mundane and invigorates weary souls. As a result, we have more energy to take an interest in others and are more confident about venturing beyond the bounds of boring familiarity.

God's Holy Spirit raises us from the grave of lethargy, obsession and fear precisely by guiding us from the illusion of safety onto a sacred pilgrimage to the place of deepest craving, the relentless desire of each human heart—union with God, with others, and with our true self.

Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord.”

“I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” Forgetting that it is God’s Spirit that gives us life is ultimately as dangerous as forgetting to breathe. Fortunately for us, our body will not allow us to forget. In many ways too, our psyche won’t let us forget that life comes from God. Who among us has not felt the dryness of meaninglessness, either for a moment or for a period of our life? And who has not experienced agitation, lack of peace? These are reflexive actions that prompt us to take a closer look at where we are coming from the where we are going with our live. They force us to conclude that change is required.

The dryness to which I refer comes from a chronic or temporary disconnection from the source of our vitality—our particular identity, God-given gifts and unique mission. Energy literally flows through our bodies, intellect and psyche to the degree that these are aligned, allowing God’s breath or Spirit to drive our action, thoughts and feelings. Agitation, on the other hand, comes from dissonance between our true and false self. The more we operate out of alternate personalities, the more agitated we become.

Peace comes from breathing deeply and letting God’s own life penetrate each physical, psychological and spiritual cell. By it, we find the resolution of discordance that plagues our wounded, fearful and compulsive nature. In fact, God’s Holy Spirit is the only effective agent of unity. It functions surreptitiously through the reconciliation of duty, need and desire; the integration of seemingly contradictory facets of our personality; and through healthy adaptation to the reality that surrounds us.

I am restless until I rest in you.

– Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*

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The prophet Ezekiel holds a special place in the life of Saint Francis. It is from this book of the Old Testament that the familiar Franciscan symbol—the tau—was taken. The tau is the sign that is said to have been laid on those who are to be spared by the angel of death. The Book of Ezekiel mentions in chapter nine, with reference to a punishment meted by God, “He called to the man dressed in linen with scribe’s ink-horn in his belt and Yahweh said to him, ‘Go all through the city, all through Jerusalem, and mark a tau (cross) on the foreheads of all who grieve and lament over all the loathsome practices in it.’” (v.4) Only these would be spared. Tau is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew scripture, which early Christian writers used for their Biblical commentaries. It represents Jesus’ death and resurrection as the ending of the reign of sin.

The tau became a sign of repentance or conversion. In his history of the Franciscan and Pre-Franciscan penitential movement, Raffaele Pazzelli writes.

The concept of metanoia...has a special function in...Revelations where the “Spirit” demands of the seven churches the conversion from post-baptismal sin...The term metanoia (penance) indicates a constant yet developing idea; it is a conversion that is theocentric (turn to God), ethical (flee evil and do good), and affective (love God.)

For Francis, conversion meant a connection to the Holy Spirit who offered joy beyond all of the pleasures of his rowdy youth. He trusted the Holy Spirit to teach him the ways of Jesus and the love of the only Father that we would obey.

Abundant life and true joy are kinfolks. *In Streams of Living Water*, the joy of Saint Francis is presented as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Author Richard Foster writes, “Holy joy is one of the most common marks of those who walk in the power of the Spirit, and Francis and his merry band possessed it in abundance.” Thomas of Celano adds that Francis “spoke with such great fervour of spirit, that, not being able to contain himself for joy...he moved his feet as though he were dancing.” Foster commends to his readers Francis of Assisi as a model of “charismatic jubilee,” meaning that his joy came directly from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, his most important decisions were taken with reference to the Holy Spirit, perhaps most notably, his conversion and decision to radically change the course of his life: “The Lord Himself led me along (lepers) and I had mercy up [on them...and afterward I lingered a little and left the world.”

(Francis) is marked in his identity with the Word of God made flesh, and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is his “portion, which leads into the land of the living,” and in this he articulates the fullest, richest call of the human person.

– Regis Armstrong and Ignatius Brady, *Introduction to Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*

JUNE 2009

I am haunted by the inscription at the beginning of Richard Rohr's *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*. It reads, "One always learns one's mystery at the price of one's innocence."

The Christian expression "abundant life" refers to a quality of being that lies beyond superficialities. It is the ultimate expression of authenticity. That's what makes it so challenging. It is a pearl of great price. It is desirable, even haunting like the mariner's siren. It is filled with goodness and holds the promise of complete joy. Yet it lies on the other side of a great chasm, across a stormy sea, beyond a frightening darkness.

That is why we settle for facsimile life, which narcotizing us with false comfort. Our pleasure seeking, pain-avoiding nature inclines us toward the familiar rather than the foreign, the bird in hand of fleeting pleasure rather than elusive spiritual joy. Yet, there is a deep-down knowing in our heart that recognizes that abundant life is only to be found in the ultimate truth about ourselves and about the universe, and not in the fairy tales of childhood or the cynical reductionism of adulthood.

We are all seekers of truth and the fullness of life. Compelled as we are to find this Holy Grail, we intuit that it contains something that we would fear to drink. For this reason, daily doses of contemplative prayer are needed to fortify us for the journey. It is an unknowable pilgrimage into the mystery of our own unique "I am."

The darkness of which I write, the loss of innocence, is the inescapable reality of suffering. We find strains of this in Judaism and Christianity as well as Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism. Also, we find an amazing convergence of views among classic philosophers. (Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering*)

The prophets of Hebrew Scripture hold our feet to the fire. Abraham teaches us that faith suffers; Samuel, that suffering speeds history's cycle; Jeremiah, that no one is irrepensible; Hosea, that suffering is a note in a love song; Joel, that one day the mystery of suffering and the deeper and more original mysteries of sin and death will be solved; and Isaiah, that we begin to fathom their depths with the Messiah's atonement and resurrection.

Suffering must never be sought. Such an attitude would be unhealthy. But suffering must be accepted as an inevitable part of the abundant life that we seek out of healthy desire. Suffering must not be a goal but it does mark important milestones along the journey to the destination of our life. The cross, which is foolishness to some and a stumbling block to others, is part of the human experience. Knowing this is an important part of Christian wisdom.

Ultimately, the joy of our life, the fullness of its meaning, is to be found in service, which is the truest expression of Christian love, also known to us as charity. Service that is not romantic idealism but concrete self-giving is a cup of suffering and joy. Once we realize that fact, the only question left for each of us to answer for ourselves is where to find the place, manner and price of that service. As Albert Schweitzer once remarked, "The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who seek and find how to serve."

It is often much easier to succumb to the darkness of tunnel vision than to permit the Lord to expand our world view as we discipline ourselves to tune in to his plan for our life.

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Living life in all its fullness is a struggle. We can only deny that fact by sitting and watching from a safe distance. Falling does not deter the child from learning to walk. He stubs his toes even with his first steps toward meaningful existence. Later, he endures scrapes, bruises and even broken bones as he ventures into the mysterious wider world. Spiritually, while so many of us are content to crawl, the heroes of our faith beckon us to stand, walk and even run.

Job is a figure of suffering and growth. He stands at the centre of a puzzling story. Blameless and upright, he ought to be the object of bountiful blessings yet he is visited by numerous curses. How can God be called God and allow such a night of darkness? Yet it is precisely during the long night of loss that he is transformed and doubly blessed: “I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees you.” (Job 42: 12) This is reminiscent of Saint John of the Cross’ Dark Night: “O guiding night! O night more lovely than the dawn! O night that has united the Lover with his beloved, transforming the beloved in her Lover.”

Tragedy can send us in one of two directions—despair or the discovery of deeper meaning.

In some ways, Saint Francis is a Job-like figure. Following deprivation and illness during and following his year-long imprisonment, the joy of his exuberant youth was replaced with what a long period of crushing meaninglessness that resembles depression. The failed knight enters the dark night. Like Job, he remains faithful to an authentic search for meaning amid the vestiges of adolescent dreams. His tenacity is eventually rewarded with a joy that surpasses the false consolation of earthly pleasures. Learning the meaning of true joy is perhaps the greatest insight of his life.

As a result of his obedience to the exigencies of the dark night, Saint Francis’ life—like that of Job—becomes all the more fruitful. He is blessed with the fellowship of countless brothers and sisters, both in his own lifetime as well as through 800 years of Franciscan tradition.

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

– Job 42: 10

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The innocence that must give way to mystery is the naïve idea that God has a plan that is opposed to the deepest, most authentic desire of the human heart. That illusion is innocence inasmuch as it emerges from a pious perception of God as omnipotently micromanaging our lives or, even more foolishly, of faith as a magical amulet that guarantees eternal bliss. And it presumes that humans are instruments of evil, inherently undeserving of inner peace or true joy. These images of God and of men and women are impotent at best and potentially very dangerous.

Friendship is a more helpful model of relationship with God. I’m not suggesting that we are equal to God

but only that God's will is that we grow into loving relationship that honours the fact that he created us in his image. Jesus said as much, "I no longer call you servants... Instead, I call you friends... You did not choose me, but I chose you." (John 15:15-16)

Friends love one another, but they sometimes quarrel, and even do so forcefully. Take the case of Jacob. In the Book of Genesis, we find Jacob in combat during a dark night. The figurative imagery is striking.

Jacob was left alone; and a man got him in a body-hold until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint and he held him in a body hold. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven-with God and with-humans, and have prevailed." 32:24-28)

Jacob's insistence on being blessed is amazing. It is at once irreverent and necessary. It comes at a price. He will limp for the rest of his days. But he will walk far. He is now a free man who can live abundantly. Like the resurrected Jesus, he will always carry the marks of his passion. But his life is renewed and operates at a more cosmic level than before.

For Jacob, as for each of us, abundant life involved struggle. God's blessing was imperative and he would risk everything for it. One can argue that he fought with God or one can say that he wrestled with a demon. Either way, the result is the same. Blessing and curse are the choices that stand before us at all times (Cf. Deut. 30) Our woundedness and giftedness are in the same place. We cannot wrestle with one without engaging the other.

It is far more likely that Jacob's wresting happened within rather than without. In the end, that's where the real struggle occurs, even when it begins with an external experience. What surrounds us is mere inspiration for the real story of our life. The inner narrative is its ultimate reality.

The dream hypothesis has allowed us to get to the authentic Jacob. Dreams, vision or reality, when all is said and done what counts is that he is given the opportunity to see himself as he is and as God sees him.

– Lytta Basset, *Holy Anger*

JULY 2009

Generosity is the beginning of abundant life, the life of God. It is a form of participation in the self-effusive nature of God.

The desire to grow this generosity is at the root of Crib and Cross Franciscan Ministries' (CCFM) outreach program, Hope for Africa. It has been a significant aspect of its apostolate since my first visit to Malawi in 2004, not just in the projects that CCFM has funded but to a much greater extent in the message that has been delivered in homilies, retreats and missions: Solidarity with the poor is the core of our humanity.

Generosity is the natural outpouring of love that flows from a compassionate heart. Compassion is a central theme in Franciscan theology and action. It may be said that Franciscan spirituality is an awareness of a deep desire to live in communion with others in fraternal love, following the example of Jesus Christ. Compassion is one of its essential qualities.

Recently, I revisited after five years the southeast African country of Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the world. I saw with my own eyes what we have achieved and the joy and hope that it is bringing to those living under the crushing weight of poverty. In Karonga, I was met by 40 late teens, for the most part young men and women made orphans by AIDS. They were students at the trade school that we built with the help of St. Thomas A Becket parish in Pierrefonds. As we drove from Mzuzu, we were greeted by singing students carrying welcoming signs. We heard speeches and songs, saw a skit on AIDS and shared a meal after touring the buildings that house carpentry and tailoring workshops.

In Mzuzu, I met Standard 8 students who were in the two classrooms block that we built with donor support. Lunyangwa Girls Primary School has classrooms of 100. Those in their final year are in classes of 50 now, thanks to fundraising by the Catholic Women's League at St. Thomas A Becket parish. They express their gratitude by sleeping on the floor in their final semester in order to be sure to succeed.

Also in Mzuzu, I interviewed the headmaster and students at Marymount Catholic Secondary School for Girls where we built a computer lab, thanks to donations made by Queen of Angels Academy in Dorval. This will give them an edge in the struggle to change their lives. Despite the fact that this is one of the finest high schools in the country, 650 girls live in what we would call deplorable conditions. In addition, at Marymount, twelve students received grants from the bursary fund that we organized through a national appeal.

I reflected on why I was going to Africa, and why CCFM persists in keeping alive its Hope for Africa apostolate despite all the competition in the huge relief and development industry, I came to realize that it goes to the heart of what it means to be religious, to forget oneself, giving oneself to a cause or another person.

Though poorer in wealth, (Francis) was richer in generosity.

– Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*

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The foundation of compassionate love, according to Saint Bonaventure, is the image and reality of the crucified Christ. It is an awesome fact that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) But it is even more striking that he “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:6-8). In a book about the mystical theology of Saint Bonaventure, Ilia Delio writes, “For it is in the brokenness of the cross that God pours himself out in the world in the form of compassionate love... The peace that is the fruit of union with Christ interiorly is the peace that Bonaventure envisions in the world when all Christians unite mystically to the Crucified and express their union in compassionate love.”

Compassionate love is not pity. It is a fully engaged participation in the suffering of another. This was Christ’s mission on earth. He could only authentically and effectively proclaim liberty, sight and freedom by becoming poor, captive and oppressed himself. (Cf. Luke 4:18) He could not be Love incarnate without intimately relating to another at the most pivotal point of human existence, in our vulnerability and suffering. For the mission that he was given, Jesus had to be born in poor and humble conditions and end his life in humiliation, not so much to “pay” for our sins but for the simple reason that the incarnation was to manifest the power, wisdom and goodness of God in the darkest realm of earthly reality, at the outer limits of hope.

Delio concludes, “Bonaventure never explicitly articulated a world view, still one is present in his writing where they are read with the Crucified Christ as the hermeneutical key.” That is not only the principle insight of Saint Francis of Assisi, which was validated by the stigmata, but it also represents the specificity of Christianity itself. Christ is central to our faith and not just an appendage to the Trinity or merely the protagonist in a narrative about morality. Jesus Christ is the epicentre of creation. Referring to Saint Bonaventure’s mysticism of the crucified Christ, Delio writes, “Simply put, the destiny of the created order depends on humanity and humanity’s relation to Christ the centre. Anthropology is bound up with Christology. Francis is not only her model, but he also reveals the profound role of the human person in the created world—a dynamic role that is kindled by the compassionate love of the Crucified.”

True piety drew (Francis) up to God through devotion, transformed him into Christ through compassion, attracted him to his neighbour through condescension and symbolically showed a return to the state of original innocence through universal reconciliation with each and every thing.

– Saint Bonaventure, *Major Life of Saint Francis*

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Authentic life is a fulfilling life. It is not achieved through the accomplishment of great schemes but by the intensity and fruitfulness of love that is patterned after God’s generosity, unselfish and unrestricted. Human existence, as a noted psychiatrist once wrote, “is always directed to something or someone other than itself, be it a meaning to fulfill or a human being to be encountered lovingly. Love is both life and death. It is the cause of life and the consummation of the self.

To live is to love. Abundant life is, by extension, the fullness of love. It is the highest point in our human journey from fear to fulfilment. The ultimate human tragedy is to refuse love because of fear that locks us into a death-dance of insensibility and isolation, passionless, without compassion.

Compassionate love does not demand deprivation but it does offer the opportunity to draw closer to those who are suffering and who can heal our own well-hidden woundedness, carefully covered-up fragility and foolishly denied vulnerability. Consequently, personal sacrifice may be the gift that we choose to offer in exchange. Compassionate love is the life-blood of human existence. The life of Jesus Christ is the story of compassionate love, and his humanity is precisely the model of our own. We err when we imagine Jesus as a sort of superhero whose extraordinary exploits are beyond us. The rich tradition of the imitation of Christ is based on the belief that many, albeit not all, of Christ's attitudes and behaviours were for us to observe and adopt, with God's grace. His love for us must be seen as having concrete and practical meaning and value.

Jesus always surprised his contemporaries by associating with the discredited and downcast of society. On the one hand, he said that it was for them that he came and, on the other, he ranted on against the hypocrisy of the privileged and the powerful. Very clearly, Jesus' authenticity blossomed in his relations with the poor. There is perhaps a lesson here for us.

It is sometimes difficult to sort through the admonitions and prohibitions that are prescribed to guide Christian life. Yet, Jesus left no doubt about the criteria by which our lives will be judged. If we will have been compassionate in his holy name, we will have been faithful to the Gospel.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

– Matthew 25: 32-40

AUGUST 2009

“I want to live until the day I die,” declared a middle-aged African woman living with AIDS. She was speaking to an audience in Winnipeg comprising a variety of people from various Christian denominations who shared a common interest in the plight of those suffering under the crushing weight of this pandemic. I knew immediately that this lovely lady understood what Jesus means by “abundant Life.”

What the speaker did effectively was to drive home the fact that life is not made less abundant by things that lie ahead, whether loss of power, prestige or possessions. Similarly, it is not curtailed by future events, such as illness and death. It blossoms in the present moment. However, our anxiety about the future can, and often does, dwarf the life that we lead today.

The reduction of life energy to which we all too often abdicate is also due, in part, to values that underestimate what contributions people can make at all stages in life in all conditions of health, and in all sectors of society. We are deluded by false systems that inflate the merits of industrial productivity and communal activism while shamelessly discounting the part played by persons whose worth is more intrinsic or relates to activities for which there is no evident measurement.

That means that the deck is stacked against many people. The house wins if they go home early, having had their proverbial pockets picked by master craftsmen who know that the biggest payouts come after the sun sets. Those who realize, therefore, that they are fully alive throughout the day and the night, despite the odds, are twice blessed. They are among the few that realize that quality of life is not what advertisers insist that it is; they actually stand a better chance of experiencing true joy and hold on longer to their winnings than those who cash in all their chips when their luck runs out.

The secret is to live according to the ways of God and not the ways of the world. God’s ways are timeless and endless. They are not rooted, as are human customs oftentimes, in fear. In fact, they are not rooted at all. Life in God floats on living water and progresses along currents of grace.

If survival is an art, then mangroves are artists of the beautiful: not only that they exist at all...but that they can and do exist as floating islands, as trees upright and loose, alive and homeless on the water.

– Annie Dillard, *Sojourner*

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Terminal or chronic illness and physical or mental handicaps constitute another major camp of conspirators that limit or threaten abundant life. Probably out of fear of our own vulnerability and certainly because of our obsession about productive work, most people and most governments marginalize those deemed less “useful” to greater or lesser degrees. Some isolate them through the use of institutions and programs. Others integrate them into the mainstream but fail to take the necessary steps to make full participation possible.

When this happens, we blame others. Yet, we are often the culprit. Moreover, we are often the victim as well. We all question the value of a life in which quality factors are compromised—energy, creativity, mobility, autonomy. As each deteriorates, we tend to think less of the person, even when we are that person. When this happens, we are all impoverished.

Jean Vanier has for several decades already advocated for the mentally handicapped. His premise, analysis and remedy are critically important for all of us who hope to achieve abundance in our own lives. He points to the fragility in each of us; to the fear that causes us to eschew those whose woundedness disturbs us; and to the need for a community that is marked by hospitality, forgiveness and hope. He reminds us that love is not achieved without a price, a sometimes painful transformation of the heart.

Our universe is a wounded universe, divided, suffering, with great despair and poverty, where there are many signs of death, division and hatred. But all of these signs of death are taken up in the Cross of Jesus and transfigured in the Resurrection. Our hope is that the winter of humanity will gradually be transformed to the bursting forth of love, for it is to this that we are called. (Jean Vanier, *Be Not Afraid*)

We live in an age of victimization. Most of us are guilty to some degree of blaming people or circumstances—and sometimes God—for our inability to live to our full potential. We blame parents, children, co-workers, politicians, administrators, bankers and even weather forecasters for the diminution of our lives as time passes, opportunities vanish and health fades. Yet there is one thing that we can learn from people who constantly live in the shadow of death—those who live in the poorest countries in the world. People such as the African woman living with AIDS can teach us something about living fully each day. It seems that living in the constant presence of death drives a person to not make excuses but to make the best of life.

We live in anxious times—so much uncertainty; so much instability; so much to worry about. The human spirit is quick to oblige. We are a fretful lot even though we understand that anxiety kills our motivation to live abundantly. It shortens our breath, constricts our gate and limits our reach. Worrying is the sworn enemy of abundant life.

I tell you, do not worry about your life...do not worry about tomorrow.

– Matthew 6: 25, 34

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Aging is often seen as a threat to abundance in life. For most people today, aging is a curse. As certain faculties slowly deteriorate, individuals gradually feel that the quality of their life is undermined. In many cases, they are stigmatized by ageism. Ageism is rampant in the workplace, the marketplace and the political arena. Ironically, it is also manifest in community groups, and even the family and the local church. Again, society is impoverished by such distortions.

This is so unfortunate. God does not withdraw from a person's life as years advance. In many ways, God's action intensifies. Life in later years is blessed with special graces that actually make "abundance" more achievable, not less.

In a healthy setting, this time of abundant grace is marked by a few signs that are unmistakable—a clarification of values and priorities; an increased awareness of one's gifts and their utility to others; a profound sense of gratitude; and an unprecedented stillness that differs substantively from previous periods of serenity.

Courage is needed at this stage of life in order to let go of familiar categories and to soar across horizons previously unimagined or that we would not have previously dared to dream. Herman Hesse wrote, “Serenely let us move to distant places and let no sentiments of home detain us. The Cosmic Spirit seeks not to restrain us but lifts us stage by stage to wider spaces.” Wider space is a metaphor for more abundant life. Letting go graciously is the price of God’s promise of abundant life.

Neurotic behaviour in people is often attributable to an inability or refusal to move on, grow up and to surrender things that keep us from advancing. Healthy ageing requires a willingness to let go and to enter into the mystery of life along with its many surprises, some of which will be distressing but most of which would be blessings if we allow them. In fact, as we grow older, we must necessarily be more open to the unknown and not replace one form of busyness with another. This, of course, does not mean that we should be passive but only that we should be attentive to our surroundings and to the people who surround us. Aging is therefore a grace-filled opportunity to live less by automatism and more by intentionality—by chiselling away excess rock to reveal the exquisite sculpture that is our life.

Peter van Breeman, author of “Summoned at Every Age,” identifies a series of values that we have an opportunity to enhance as we age.

- To practice silence and seek conscious contact with the source of our being
- To stop being busy in order to be able to listen quietly to those close to us
- To rid ourselves of unholy or even holy compulsions
- To set out on the longest journey of all
- To let important recollections and memories surface and quietly enjoy them

The longest journey is perhaps the most meaningful of all. It engages the whole person freely, authentically and abundantly.

*My Lord and my God, take everything from me that keeps me from Thee.
My Lord and my God, give everything to me that brings me near to Thee.
My Lord and my God, take me away from myself and give me completely to Thee.*

– Nicholas of Flue (1417-1482)

SEPTEMBER 2009

In the spiritual life, abundance needs maturity. To bear fruit, the tree of life must grow through stages. Abundant life, with our identity and giftedness in full bloom—as Christ proposes—is the culmination of personal development. It is not innate but the product of grace that grows in ground made fertile by healthy reflection on our life experience.

In an interview last year with the editors of U.S. Catholic Magazine, Franciscan author Richard Rohr spoke of a spirituality that is appropriate to the second half of life and characterized that phase in these terms:

The second half of life is love, joy, peace, and the Holy Spirit. You've experienced the death of the need to be right, to think well of yourself, to think you're superior to and more moral than other people. It's a tremendous peace. You don't have anything to prove anymore. You don't have to live up to or to live down to your reputation, you just are who you are. You have met the enemy and the only enemy is you, not any other group, religion, nation, or race. People in the second half of life are not rebels. If you're a rebel, you're still trapped in the first half. That's not wisdom yet. At the wisdom stage, you don't need to rebel or hate or oppose.

There is nothing automatic about this attitude. Some people who are well advanced in age lack it and some people in early adulthood have it already. There is no rule that says that you have to wait for your 40s, 50s, and 60s to enjoy the freedom of this more mature outlook. This is not to say that we should skip over the phase of personal discipline at the beginning of our spiritual journey. The first half of life has its purpose. Society has to transmit to us its values and code of conduct. In faith and religion, as well as any other area of human development, a solid foundation must first be built. Rohr adds, "If you don't get it when you're young, it's a problem. You end up needing rigid rules and superiority systems in your 30s and 40s."

Maturity in Christ is a topic rarely raised in sermons. We tend to stick to the basics because the church has a pedagogical duty to make sure that the basics are known and understood. (Even at that, our definition of what is basic is often very limited. Is justice a basic tenet of our faith? Is charity toward the poor? These certainly ought to be if they are not, judging from the words of Jesus found in the Gospels.) Eventually, though, our life knowledge outreaches our understanding. It is then time to grow in wisdom, often at the price of certitude.

The tragedy is that spiritual growth is stunted if we never graduate from the level of doctrine. Simple doctrine is the milk of spiritual infancy. To it are added heartier nutrients in adolescence, mixed with the solid food of good works in early adulthood. But this remains a very basic diet. It usually proves to be quite inadequate when we are challenged by more demanding events, such as physical or emotional suffering. That is when we must rethink our spiritual diet in order to access true joy that is the prize of authentic faith—life so abundant that it is not smothered by doubt or paralysed by tragedy.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

1 Cor. 13: 11

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The social sciences can help shed light on the dynamics of our spiritual journey. For instance, some theories of human development align reasonably well with our contemporary understanding of scripture. One such theorist is Lawrence Kohlberg, a psychologist whose field research has provided useful information regarding the stages of moral development. He identifies six of these, ranging from the obedience and punishment orientation, typically experienced at infancy, to motivations of universal justice and the common good, which one would expect to be associated with late adulthood.

Progress across the spectrum of styles in moral attitude and activity is not a function of heredity or socialization but of reflection and careful thinking about moral problems—ours and those of others. Kohlberg suggests that development occurs when our reflection is the result of frank and democratic discussion with others whose viewpoints are different from our own.

What is especially interesting about Kohlberg's research is that most people never make it past stages three and four, which has a real bearing on the question of spiritual maturity or authentic and abundant living. Fully two thirds of the population sampled were found to live at the third and fourth stages of moral development. These are the stages at which the priority is the maintenance of good interpersonal relationships and of social order, respectively. A more nuanced and complex approach to interpersonal and social relationships comes later, if at all.

At stages three and four, which should occur during teen years and early adulthood, there are many barriers to living abundantly. There is, for instance, an underdeveloped respect for the inherent dignity of the human person. Ultimately, the barrier that separates people at this level from abundant living is the fear—an often subconscious fear—that betrays the freedom that we so desperately seek.

It is only in the later stages that we learn that systems are meant to be at the service of people and not the other way around, and that the public good is not antithetical to individual rights. W.C. Crain provides a good example in *Theories of Development*, “Martin Luther King argued that laws are only valid insofar as they are grounded in justice, and that a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. King also recognized the general need for laws and democratic processes, and he was therefore willing to accept the penalties for his actions. Nevertheless, he believed that the higher principle of justice required civil disobedience.” Value trumps satisfaction.

Moral development is tied to abundant life inasmuch as it enables us to discern the meaning and purpose of God's word in our life. It is the path by which we advance toward intimacy with God and—with his help—the serene actualization of our full potential.

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

1 Peter 1: 2b

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Finally, let's look at abundant life in relation to stages of faith. James Fowler, an associate of Lawrence Kohlberg, developed a psychology of human development with a special focus on the universal quest for meaning. Not surprisingly, he proposes six stages as well: intuitive-projective faith, mythic-literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith and universalizing faith.

Again, it is only a rare person who reaches the ultimate level, which is not to say that it is impossible. It does, however, require effort and determination to sift through the materials of our lives authentically and unselfishly. Foster does not see the progress of faith as movement along degrees of perfection or even the eradication of neurotic behaviour. It primarily concerns perspective: “Greatness of commitment and vision often coexist with great blind spots and limitations.”

Both stages five and six are marked by an acute awareness of other people, their intrinsic dignity as well as their worldviews. But whereas stage five is a time of “sometimes painful disruption of deeply held but unexamined world view or belief systems,” stage six is a time of reconciliation between paradoxes and acceptance of attendant tensions. The social perspective, which has broadened progressively from the egocentrism of infancy, has been “drawn beyond itself into a new quality of participation and grounding in God, or the Principle of Being.”

Indeed, the true spiritual joy of abundant life is most directly linked to stages five and six, which Foster termed post-conventional: “We are tracing the path by which persons in community become subjects before God and increase in their capacities for self-aware, self-critical, and responsible partnership with God.”

But lest we fall prey to a fantasy of omnipotence, let us not lose sight of God’s effort in relation to our own, and the need for us to let God be God just as God lets us be us. God’s provision includes grace that is built into the process of birth, of parental care and into the orders our species has evolved for the maintenance of life. Grace that comes as part of creation can be called ordinary grace. Kohlberg writes, “In insisting upon the radical freedom of God, we must also take account of what might be called extraordinary grace—the unexpected manifestations of God’s care.”

Indeed we also work, but are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us. It has gone before us so that we may be healed, and follows us so that once healed, we may be given life.

– St. Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*

OCTOBER 2009

Were it not for the expression “Divide and conquer,” many of us would probably never have heard of Niccolo Machiavelli. In fact, he was so “Machiavellian” that he intentionally made his claims about the means of power provocative in order to win favour with the ruling Medici family. Machiavelli argued that it is the ruthlessness of the individual leader that determines success, even at the expense of moral values.

While the idea of division as the means of conquest may be the way of the world of politics and business, it is manifestly not the Christian way. And, although I believe that it is wrong to vilify the Renaissance author, as many do, I would not hesitate for a moment to suggest that the spiritual force behind this strategy is one of darkness and death. While some would equate earthly power with abundant life, the joy that Jesus promises could not be further from this brutal connivance. Indeed, abundant life comes from unity; not division. It is not conquered; it is received.

Jesus spoke often of unity. He urged all to remain united to him in order that we might be fully alive. He bade us to act as one flock with one shepherd (Jn10:16); to gather others who are dispersed (Jn11:52) He prayed that we would all be one (Jn17:21). Paul counselled unity which the Spirit gives (Eph4:3) Unity is a grace from God. It is a share of God’s own life, life in the blessed Trinity. According to Saint Augustine, everything about God is at once Trinitarian and united. Catherine Mowry Lacugna writes, “The Trinity creates, the Trinity redeems, the Trinity sanctifies...the Trinity dwells in our hearts.” (God for Us, 1991)

It follows then that life in God is a life of unity, and that division, any amount of division, introduces into the soul elements of death. Morally speaking, we call this sin. It is never a virtue. Even when it is necessary, as in the division of responsibilities or even of being, there must be an attempt to be aware of consequences and to take appropriate mitigating action.

Sometimes the tension between division and unity can be creative, such as in the respect of diversity. Each person is a unique, each part of a distinct culture, each informed by a discrete tradition. But the full value of diversity is ultimately found in loving unity. Similarly—contrary to what many would argue—our lives gain in meaning as we become one with its creator and sustainer. We are most alive when we are connected to the source of abundant life.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

John 15: 4

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When we bring together two huge challenges—unity with God and unity with one another—we are soon faced with the question of unity between ways of being united to God. This question is perplexing to say the least. Most of us have lived through the benefits and hazards of segregating religious practice along national and denominational lines. We have also witnessed the benefits and hazards of syncretism, the blending of elements borne out of divergent traditions. Few are those who have gone to the effort of seeking a creative encounter by being both faithful to the foundational principles of their own tradition while being open to the God-gifted uniqueness of the other’s. Those who have courageously done so, even if

they have taken awkward steps, can be regarded as trailblazers in our collective pilgrimage to abundant life.

One such person is Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk who lived in India from 1955 until his death in 1994. He wrote, “I had long been familiar with the mystical tradition of the West, but I felt the need of something more which the East alone could give; above all the sense of the presence of God in nature and the soul, a kind of natural mysticism which is the basis of all Indian spirituality. I felt therefore that if a genuine meeting of East and West was to take place, it must be this deepest level of their experience, and this I thought could best come though the monastic life.” (Christ in India: Essays toward a Hindu-Christian Dialogue, 1965.) What ensued was a controversial yet fruitful experiment to find unity in diversity, a kind of spiritual marriage based both on authenticity and transcendence.

Unity was at the centre of life in the Christian community that followed the customs of a Hindu ashram, unity that is well expressed in the ultimate reality of Hindu spirituality: being, knowledge or consciousness, bliss, which I prefer to phrase as ultimate Being, discernment and spiritual joy, three realities that are either explicit or implicit in Christian tradition. This functional commonality is interesting. Rather than incite syncretism, it compels each person to deepen their understanding of their own faith where they will inevitably find a common root in the human spirit, created in the likeness of God. Griffiths likened this to the human hand. Each finger is an ancient religious tradition. If you mix them, you get syncretism. “But if you go deeply into any one tradition, you converge on a center, and there you see how we all come forth from a common root. And you find how we meet people on the deeper level of their faith, in the profound unity behind all our differences.”

Griffiths also makes an important point about the necessity of looking at our own tradition from a different perspective. For instance, even though unity is a foundational principle, our history is rife with dualism, the rigid separation of good and evil, flesh and spirit, God and humanity, etc. We could use an antidote in order to live faithfully our commitment to ones. Hinduism does not juxtapose oneness and dualism but rather advocates non-dualism. While the distinction may be subtle, this makes it impossible to pursue two objectives at once, non-dualism being the only path.

How does this relate to abundant life? Quite simply because fragmentation is the enemy of life. And Western society constantly pressures us to fragment our time, attention and energy—even even our faith, hope and love. Griffiths puts it well, “The more universal you become, the more deeply personal you become.” In other words, the more boxed in our minds and hearts are, and consequently our lives, the less we are able to achieve our full potential as children of God, creator of all. The more limited is our world view, the more timid are our gestures and the more restricted is our love, the less we know the reality of God’s being and the less we are conscious of his loving action in our lives. Our joy is diminished or dwarfed as a result.

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life. This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new. At the immortal touch of the hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable. These infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still though pourest, and still there is room to fill.

Rabindranath Tagore

If we can celebrate differences while being conscious that values shared among religions make of us all one holy body, if that is the sacred goal of our spirituality, it is no less true between individuals. Abundant life comes from the communion of love, and not from the disunion that is caused by fear. Vice causes division, and underlying most vices is fear. Virtue, on the other hand, promotes unity because its highest achievement is love.

Fear rules. We create divisions to isolate ourselves from people who are different from us, from the forces of change and from the unknown. Mystery, which the other will always remain, is an anathema to us, rather than the beauty that it is because it is a reflection of the ultimate Mystery, which is the reality of God.

Love beckons. Love is a subversive force. When it enters the human psyche, it undermines the prevailing forces that pit one person against another, one community against another. Only love dispels fear. God is love. Calling us to himself, he calls us to love—not in an abstract way but concretely in healthy relationships that are based on mutual respect, compassion and, where appropriate, affection.

I think that we can hold up Saint Francis of Assisi as a model of unity and love. His love of God and all of creation is so evident that it has become the fodder of legends. The stigmata is the crown bestowed by love for his courageous imitation of Love incarnate, Jesus Christ. When we look upon Saint Francis, we see a man who, despite marked differences, was united to the Church and the Pope. We also see a man so committed to unity within the brotherhood that he accepted the verdict of the majority, even when it meant rejection of some of his ideas and of his leadership.

Saint Francis also understood the Trinity to be the image of God, the image in which we are created. In the opening chapter of *Contemplating the Trinity: The Path to the Abundant Christian Life*, Franciscan Raniero Cantalamessa points out that everyone claims to want unity and that God is unity. The image of God as Trinity is therefore indispensable because it teaches us how to live in unity: We must “move this mystery out of theology books and into our lives. All the great theologians today seem convinced that everything in Christianity stands or falls with the doctrine of the Trinity.”

There are a number of famous works of art that are inspired by the Trinity. Citing the fourteenth-century Russian monk Saint Sergius of Radonezh, Fr. Cantalamessa suggests contemplating the Trinity “to overcome the hateful divisions of this world.” He features the icon of the Trinity by Andrej Rublev. The presentation itself is interesting inasmuch as it does not attempt to “represent” the Trinity but “rather depicts the three angels who appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (Gen.18:1-15)

It is these three men who told Abraham that—incredibly—his aging wife Sarah would have a son. We must remember this: the Trinity is infinitely creative, life-giving. Fecundity and abundance are one. As human beings, we settle for so little when we seek shelter in behind imaginary walls. In fact, we seek shelter in illusion for we can never escape the fear within us. Only the triune God can help us to overcome it and eventually replace it with eternal life.

God offers abundant life that overflows with possibilities and grace. It is offered on a platter, free for the taking. It is a gift that comes with wonderful features: peace, joy, hope, love. All we need to do is courageously claim it and acknowledge that its central force is unity with God and others. It is God’s life,

generously shared. It is a song, a dance, a breath of pure delight.

Communication takes place between subject and object, but communion is beyond the division: it is sharing in basic unity.

Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*

NOVEMBER 2009

This reflection is based on a reading of two important books – Zachary Hayes OFM, *The Gift of Being: A Theology of Creation* (Collegeville, Min.: The Liturgical Press, 2001) and Ilia Delio OSF, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2008)

All life is imbued with God's. Accordingly, abundant life is linked to our capacity to see God in all of creation. This insight led Saint Francis to write the *Canticle of Creation* at the end of his life. It also led others to develop an entire theological framework about the nature and purpose of creation.

November 2009 marks the 150th anniversary of *On the Origin of Species*, the book that launched thousands of arguments about God's role in the origins of humanity. These debates typically pit science against religion, arguing on one hand that we are the product of evolution by natural selection and on the other that we were created explicitly by God as a species quite distinct from others.

More recently, some conservative Evangelical Christians have attempted to rescue creationism from ridicule by introducing a more nuanced concept called "intelligent design," which admits natural selection as an explanation for some natural phenomenon but that others "are best explained by an intelligent cause."

But what if evolution itself is an intelligent design and that natural selection is not a random process? What if it is true that God created the universe with Christ as the meaning and centre of everything? What if the Incarnation is actually part of an evolution? Beginning from the *Canticle of Creation*, the Franciscan intellectual tradition has much to offer in constructing a thoughtful response to these questions.

May Thou be praised, my Lord, with all Thy creatures (cf. Tob. 8:7), especially mister brother sun, of whom is the day, and Thou enlightens us through him. (Saint Francis, Canticle of Creation)

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The three earliest Franciscan theologians to deal with the centrality of Christ in Creation were Alexander of Hales (1183-1245), Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221-1274) and John Duns Scotus (1266-1308.) A key element of their worldview was a monumental regard for the Incarnation as a loving action with implications well beyond the need to rescue humanity from its original sin, which both Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas had seen as the sole motivation for the life of Jesus. From these, as well as from our reading of certain passages of Scripture, we had inherited elaborate doctrines of reparation, ransom or substitution that prevail to this day.

Saint Bonaventure and Scotus did not disagree that we are saved by the cross but added that the crib of Christ's birth and the entire narrative of his life have at least as much merit. As Alexander of Hales before them and others since, they saw the entry of "God Among Us" in human history as part of God's loving plan even before Creation. In fact, Hayes argues that "a world without Christ is an incomplete world."

In reality, all life is imbued with Christ who fills the universe across all time and space. His fingerprint is on everything that is created with purpose and love. The Incarnation, therefore, is the focal point of creation. It explains what came before and sets the stage for what is to follow.

Delio does an outstanding job of synthesizing the heritage of Franciscan perspectives on the Incarnation and the centrality of Christ who we rightfully regard as the king of a reign that is the destiny of all Creation. The prophet Isaiah reports it as a promise from God, “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” and Saint John receives it as an apocalyptic revelation, “Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’” (21:6)

Often we regard these statements to mean that Christ is a condemning bystander. Rarely do we understand them to suggest that Christ is an active part of this vast project of creation, conceived after the image of the holy Trinity itself. This project, the achievement of God’s own deepest desire, is ongoing and just as dynamic as the life of the Trinity because Christ is at the centre of both. The Incarnation therefore is an event of infinite significance and bearing. It holds together the whole of Creation and, not incidentally, its salvation.

It is logical to argue, I believe, that God anticipated at least the possibility of “The Fall” and was satisfied that Creation was worth the gamble because he intended from the beginning to communicate his love through the Incarnation regardless of how we would use the gift of free will: “Indeed, God did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (Jn3:17)

Referring to Hayes’ insight, Delio writes, “(He) suggests that this evolutionary universe is meaningful and purposeful because it is grounded in Christ, the Word of God. This world is not merely a plurality of unrelated things, he states, but a true unity, a true cosmos, centred in Christ.” The Incarnation is more than a historic event. It is the iconic representation of an intimate relationship between the lover and the beloved. The Holy Spirit, the Love itself, never rests, and continues the transformation and restoration by drawing everything into the life of the Trinity.

God completes what God initiates in creation and crowns it with eternal significance. (Hayes, Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity)

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Others have held similar views, notably the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), the Benedictine Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), and the Cistercian Thomas Merton (1915-1968.)

De Chardin, who was familiar with the writings of Scotus, understood evolution to be a progressive movement toward consciousness that comprised three stages. The first was one of organization in which elements were combined and differentiated. The second is the organization of humanity toward “the Omega, the risen Christ.” The third is the convergence into “a Christocentric vision of reality.” This would be achieved, he argued, because Christ lives and acts in all things. He wrote,

We may say that the dominant concern of theologians in the first centuries of the Church was to determine the position of Christ in relation to the Trinity. In our own time the vital question has become the following: to analyze and specify exactly, in its relations, the existence of the influence that holds together Christ and the universe. (*Christianity and Evolution*)

Griffiths discovered the scope of God’s presence among us at the intersection of two ancient religious

traditions, Christianity and Hinduism. As a result, his conviction that Christ is the central figure in a much larger drama that is depicted by any single spiritual system led to the conclusion that:

Christ opened up the depths of the unconscious to divine consciousness. He redeemed the whole creation by opening it to the divine life, the life of the Word, which filled his human consciousness. It is said that every man recapitulates in the womb not only all the stages of the evolution of matter but also all the stages of the evolution of human consciousness. (*Return to the Centre*)

Griffiths and de Chardin shared the view that love is key to unlocking the secrets of the universe. Delio writes that they “saw love as the very nature and structure of reality because the cosmos, created through the diving Word, is a perichoresis of Trinitarian love centred in Christ.”

Merton clearly saw Christ as the only unifying agent in Creation, the integrating force that bridges cultures, specifics and galaxies. He suggested that the closer one gets to Christ, the more one comes to understand the purposes and workings of the universe. Whereas the scientific method tends to examine by dissection in order to understand, mysticism—which is allied to the silent contemplation that he advocated—sees the totality first. Not only is the whole always greater than the sum of its parts, only the whole is true. Indeed, integration was for him the true meaning of redemption because, in effect, the downfall of all Creation is the tendency to pull away from the centre, where Christ is to be found.

To live abundantly is to be in constant communion with God. This need not require anything more than a capacity to see God in all things and in all people. As Saint Bonaventure imagined, all of Creation is the mirror and book that reveal God. Creation is the product of self-effusive Love, the ultimate emanation being the Incarnation and concluded,

From all we have said, we may gather that the created world is a kind of book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity, at three different levels of expression: as a vestige, as an image, and as a likeness. The aspect of vestige (“footprint”) is found in every creature; the aspect of image, only in intelligent creatures or rational spirits; the aspect of likeness, only in those spirits that are God-conformed. Though these successive levels, comparable to steps, the human intellect is designed to ascend gradually to the supreme Principle, which is God. (*Breviloquium*)

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3: 28)

3 | BEAUTIFUL LIVES

JANUARY 2010

Saints make us uncomfortable, so we isolate them by claiming them to be superhuman. But in reality, saints struggled with the basic stuff of life like the rest of us. Their distinction is not renunciation of their identity but rather their fidelity to it. Therefore, they ought to serve as constant reminders that our own authenticity is to be found not in our false self but in relationship with God.

Each month in 2010, we will look upon a Franciscan saint whose life is made beautiful by faith, hope and love. We can profit, not by imitation, but from their inspiration to find meaning and joy in our relations to God and others.

We begin the year by turning our attention to the challenging figure of Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), a secular Franciscan who was told by Saint Francis in a vision, “You are the only one born of me.” Beatified in 1693, her feast day was on January 4.

Like the poverello, Bl. Angela was born into wealth and privilege. She belonged to one of the leading families of Foligno, an ancient Umbrian city on the Topino River that had been an important communication route even before the days of the Roman Empire. Both in her youth and during the initial years as a wife and mother, she found pleasure in worldliness.

Not long before the age of 40, however, Bl. Angela prayed for relief from her growing dissatisfaction with the direction of her life. It was in the sacrament of penance, in the presence of a confessor to whom Saint Francis had guided her, that she found the inspiration to transform her life. The means would soon become apparent. Her husband and three sons would succumb to the plague and she would find consolation in prayer.

Soon enough, she would give away her property and join the Third Order of Saint Francis. Though her conversion was gradual, a key turning point was her pilgrimage to Assisi. She went because she wanted “to feel more strongly Christ’s presence, be faithful to the Third Order Rule she had just professed and to become and remain to the end truly poor.” The result led to a growth in intimacy with the crucified Christ, the suffering God-man and ultimately in the Trinitarian life.

Her contemplation of the mystery of God’s unfathomable love led to mystical experiences along a spiritual journey that would be described in Memorial and Instructions. Her ministry to the poor would include begging for food and alleviating the suffering of sick people. Prayer would remain her constant companion and her spiritual progress would inspire others.

Even if at times I can still experience outwardly some little sadness and joy, nonetheless there is in my soul a chamber in which no joy, sadness, or enjoyment from any virtue, or delight over anything that can be named, enters. This is where the All Good, which is not any particular good, resides, and it is so much the All Good that there is no other good.

– Bl. Angela of Foligno, *Instructions*

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During a pilgrimage to Assisi, only 10 miles from Foligno, she experienced her first vision. A number of mystical experiences would follow. To some, her actions seemed extravagant. Even her spiritual director was sceptical at first. But soon scepticism would dissipate and Bl. Angela would be urged to record these events.

Her memorial and instructions paint a picture of great mystical visions that are both poetic and incisive, touching as they do the core of Christian faith. Major themes emerge from her writings, most notably the passionate love of the Crucified, the suffering God-Man. In this regard, of particular interest is her instruction on prayer. We find in the third Instruction the triad of Christ's suffering, prayer and poverty, in which prayer plays a pivotal role.

Evidently, prayer for divine guidance is vital: "No one can be saved without divine light. Divine light causes us to begin to make progress, and leads us to the summit of perfection." Moreover, Bl. Angela understood prayer to be the medium by which we come to know not only God but also ourselves: "The purpose of prayer is nothing other than to manifest God and self. And this manifestation of God and self leads to a state of perfect and true humility."

By virtue of humility, our vision of ourselves in relation to God teaches us about the human condition in general and our own life specifically. The key is contemplation of what she calls the Book of Life—the life of Jesus Christ: "Thus they will be filled with its blessed teaching—which does not puff anyone up—and will find there every doctrine they and others need." Later she emphasises that "if you wish to be superillumined and taught, read this Book of Life."

This image of a book calls to mind the image of a mirror, as used by Cistercians in the 12th century and Franciscans in the 13th, especially in the way Saint Clare refers to humility as the mirror's frame, suspended from the wood of the cross. Contemplation of Christ Crucified also connects with the familiar words of Jean Vanier. He told an interviewer, "When you start living with people with disabilities, you begin to discover a whole lot of things about yourself... To be human is that capacity to love which is the phenomenal reality that we can give life to people; we can transform people by our attentiveness, by our love, and they can transform us. It is a whole question of giving life and receiving life, but also to discover how broken we are."

Insightfully, the servant of God teaches three necessary kinds of prayer: "Through its ineffable wisdom it has ordained that one does not attain mental prayer unless one has first passed through bodily prayer, and likewise, one does not attain supernatural prayer unless one has first assed through bodily and mental prayer." This message is important for anyone experiencing difficulties in prayer. The body both predisposes us to effective prayer and is often the only medium by which God's response is audible. We tend to rationalize what the mind receives and deny the heart but cannot so easily dismiss the ill-ease and even the illness of the body. The prayer of the mind makes us conscious of the operations of the intellect in order to eliminate inappropriate content, in order to make us receptive to the revelation of Truth.

The third Instruction then offers as outstanding examples of prayer Jesus and Mary. Jesus taught us to how to pray: "The Son of God, Jesus Christ in his human nature, himself gave us the example of the wonders of prayer and the need to persevere in it. He taught us to pray in many ways through word and deed... (The glorious Virgin, mother of Jesus Christ, God and man) taught us to pray by example of her own host holy prayer. While she prayed, divine light abounded in her more fully and made her consecrate her virginity, and even her while body and soul, more glorious to God. In this same divine light she was granted the most

perfect manifestation of who God is and who she was.”

It is through prayer, then, that one will be given the most powerful light to see God and self.

– Bl. Angela of Foligno, *Instructions*

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By 1298, Bl. Angela was a leading figure in the reform of the Order of Friars Minor but called for restraint in the face of excesses advocated by some who were dissatisfied with the evolution of the order founded almost a century before. Nonetheless, like the reformers, she cautioned against deviations from the path of spiritual poverty in all aspects of private and public life. This applied notably to preaching. Such simplicity, she argued, would allow the emergence of the Holy Spirit in power: “I do not want you to be like those who preach only with words of learning and dryly report the deeds of saints, but rather speak about them with the same divine savour as they had performed these deeds.”

According to Paul Lachance, her influence was not only felt directly by the friars in her community that regarded her as their spiritual mother but also by a wide variety of people that we would regard as paragons of the Catholic tradition. Among these are Saints Theresa of Avila, Francis of Sales and Alphonsus Liguori.

Dorothy Day often quoted Bl. Angela’s statement that praying when one doesn’t feel like it, that is forced prayers, is especially pleasing to God. Thomas Merton wrote, “This is the great truth about her life: In her passion, instead of being sort of locked up behind doors and left in a closet, becomes completely devoted to God. Passion gets completely caught up in her love for God and in the giving of herself to God.”

By today’s standards, her writing is archaic and concerns mystical phenomena that strain credulity in the modern mind. But it would be a pity to disregard its genuine insight. Few people have been as surprised by Joy, to borrow the phrase popularized by CS Lewis, and even fewer have touched the source of the Joy so directly. Even though her love for Christ seems boundless, her heart was penetrated by grace so powerful that one might say that it was not entirely mediated by him. We may say that Bl. Angela entered in an unrestricted way the entire mystery of the divine Trinity itself.

Anyone who is prepared to digest it slowly can profit from reading Memorial and Instructions. Its language is simple and direct, even if it refers to experiences to which we cannot easily relate. Her loving remembrance of visions and subsequent counsels tease our appetite, according to the Franciscan charism, for knowing God in order that we may better love and serve him.

What Angela understood of Francis’ life and teachings is...the path that he traced for her and others to follow consisted of his total conformity to the life and teachings of the God-Man Jesus Christ by way of “the ineffable light of the truest poverty.”

– Paul Lachance, “Introduction,” *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*
Also author of *Angela of Foligno: Passionate Mystic of the Double Abyss*

FEBRUARY 2010

Mystics and reformers challenge our understanding of spiritual life. Last month, we considered the mystical experience of Blessed Angela of Foligno. This month, we look at the reform of Saint Colette of Corbie (1381-1447)

Unlike Blessed Angela, Saint Colette was born of working class parents. This environment fostered in her great humility and prayerfulness. In fact, prayer would become so engrossing for her that at the age of twenty-two, she received permission to spend the rest of her life as an “ anchoress ” to pray within the confines of a room from which her only view would be the altar of a church.

Devotional literature refers to her rigorous mortification, including asking God to deprive her of physical beauty, which she regarded as a temptation. Such a request would be regarded today as lacking in appreciation for the beauty that God had created in her but we must not be quick to judge. What matters is her deep desire to avoid distractions and to focus her attention and energy on authenticity, which is the true beauty of a person. One of the benefits of sound spirituality is that it allows God to lovingly reveal to us the truth of who we are without pretence or false modesty.

By the time she withdrew from the world, Saint Colette had embraced the rule of the Third Order of Saint Francis and was already living in conformity with the evangelical counsel of poverty. Wishing to become more and more like him, she initially chose the path of solitude. But perhaps under the inspiration of Saint Francis who also spent some of his time interacting with the world, she elected to leave her self-imposed exile after four years.

Thereafter, she was inspired to restore the rule followed at the convents of Poor Clares to the observance of strict guidelines regarding poverty. Though she initially resisted what she came to experience as her true vocation, Saint Colette received the authority and blessing of the pope (in fact the antipope, Benedict XIII, then recognized by France as the rightful successor of Saint Peter) to establish a series of 17 convents in line with this primitive rule. Since her death in 1447, others have been founded in outside of France in Belgium, Germany, Spain, England and the United States.

The convents established by Saint Colette were marked by extreme poverty and the observance of perpetual fast and abstinence in order to reflect the characteristically Franciscan values of simplicity and prayer. As though they were to give reason to her earlier dismissal of outer beauty, these convents became sanctuaries of interior beauty that relies on Providence and radiates its light to the world.

*Boast not of your stature or beauty of body, which, with a little sickness,
is spoiled and disfigured; but glory in God, who gives all things and desires
to give himself above all things.*

– Thomas A Kempis, *Imitation of Jesus Christ*

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We do saints such as Saint Colette an enormous disservice when we minimize their struggle. Her ultimate accomplishments came as a result of her desire to find God amid clouds of ambiguity. Although she had

made a commitment for life to become an anchoress, Saint Colette left to follow another vision. And, even before that, she had joined successively the Beguines, the Benedictines, and the so-called “Urbanist” Poor Clares. Surely God had not directed her to follow all these paths. This may have been a case of passion running ahead of judgement.

She would have been neither the first nor the last to pursue, almost blindly, the well of living water for which her thirst was most acute. (I think spontaneously of Thomas Merton whose pilgrimage took many turns before he entered the Trappist monastery in Genesee, New York. Gethesemani, KY). Does it really matter that ours is a winding road when every step nourishes the soul and clarifies the mind? Given our limitations and brokenness, would we be truly authentic if our progress was as straight as a laser beam?

When God calls, he does so from within. His voice is inevitably muffled by scar tissue of childhood wounds, dulled by the deafness of a hardened heart, and distorted by the vagaries of human understanding. Our hearing is imperfect, our understanding flawed, our judgement impaired and our decisions tentative. Yet, God impels us to persevere, to walk valiantly in the direction of what seems like an external call. But it comes from within. We find that hard to accept because within is such an imperfect place.

The grace of God is chiefly his fidelity. God’s love is patient before all other qualities, including kindness (cf. 1 Cor. 13: 4-7). That’s a good thing because most of us find it difficult to discern his still small voice. We are aided, however, by signs. God guides with consolations and reproves with feelings, more or less intense, of disquiet.

*You have made us and directed us toward yourself
and our heart is restless until we rest in you.*

– Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

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Saint Colette was canonized May 24, 1807. The Catholic Encyclopaedia notes that “she was not only a woman of sincere piety, but also intelligent and energetic, and exercised a remarkable moral power over all her associates. She was very austere and mortified in her life, for which God rewarded her by supernatural favours and the gift of miracles.”

What are we to learn from the austerity of reformers? In Church history, the people that we label as “reformers” are typically people who we regard today as austere. That word conjures negative images. Such reformers repel rather than attract our attention. Our mind and heart tends to close before we hear what they may have to say about the desires of our own heart.

Our revulsion is partially understandable. Modern people have come to believe that the spiritual life is one that is marked by easy love and spontaneous joy. New age practitioners deliberately obscure the boundaries between prayer and pleasure, monasteries and spas. Many are inclined to see psychology and spirituality as synonymous rather than complementary: Feeling good means being holy, they might suggest. Prayer is seen as beneficial, though frequently misunderstood. Charity is celebrated, as long as the sacrifice is not too great.

But is there any place left for fasting, mortification and renunciation? Or are these mere vestiges of a “darker” time in religious history? According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, mortification is “a means of curing bad habits and implanting good ones.” Mortification, such as fasting, should never be an end in itself but as a means to an end. It has a lengthy history in spiritual development. The Encyclopaedia adds, “The term originated with St. Paul, who traces an instructive analogy between Christ dying to a mortal and rising to an immortal life, and his followers who renounce their past life of sin and rise through grace to a new life of holiness” (Cf. Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5; Galatians 5:24).

Ultimately, spiritual exercises are for a purpose. They are not an end in themselves. Fasting reminds us that we hunger for something more vital than what we ordinarily consume. Mortification recalls our baptismal rebirth in Christ. Renunciation is little more than its logical consequence. Life is a series of choices, each entailing renunciation. Whenever two options are confronted, presumably we chose the better of the two. To make the decision effective, we must renounce the other. This action may be difficult, even entailing a grieving process, but it is essential for the chosen option to bear fruit. We can think, for instance, of marriage: to say “yes” to one person necessarily implies renouncing others. So it is with all choices, including those made in the process of spiritual development.

The impetus for reform that Saint Colette embodies in the 15th Century was part of a broadly based response to some excesses then witnessed in the church. The reform that was enacted by those like her who remained faithful to the church was one answer. The Reformation was another. Though usually well intentioned, reforms can have a salvific or destructive effect, depending on whether they promoted unity or division. It is the same with reforms of the heart that are symbolized by renunciation. They are potentially dangerous if they lead to spiritual vanity; they are wholesome and healing if they foster fidelity to our true identity and mission.

We must faithfully keep what we have promised. If through human weakness we fail, we must always without delay arise again by means of holy penance, and give our attention to leading a good life and to dying a holy death. May the Father of all mercy, the Son by his holy passion, and the Holy Spirit, source of peace, sweetness and love, fill us with consolation. Amen

– Saint Colette, *Spiritual Testament to her Sisters*

MARCH 2010

At the age of 17, a young lady born into one of the most prominent families of Assisi set aside her expensive dress, allowed Saint Francis to cut her hair and clothe her in a rough tunic and a thick veil, and vowed to follow a life of penance and prayer. It was March 18, 1212, Palm Sunday.

To avoid scandal, Clare Offreduccio di Favarone at first resided with the Benedictine nuns of San Paolo, near Bastia. But her father had other plans. He had intended for her to marry, so he became furious at the news of her secret entry into religious life. He tried persuasion and even intimidation to bring her back home. But the gracious lady who would come to be known as Saint Clare of Assisi held her ground. Soon she was joined by her younger sister Agnes.

Once others joined with them, Saint Clare and her sister were established in a rudimentary building beside the simple chapel of San Damiano, situated outside the town. The poor church, which had been rebuilt by Saint Francis a short time before, was ceded to them by the Benedictines. Thus was founded the first community of the Order of Poor Ladies—the Poor Clares.

Named Clare by her mother because of an answer that she received in prayer, Saint Clare radiates still a wisdom that is remarkable. Humble but tenacious; poor in possessions but rich of faith; simple in action but profound in writing, her life is worthy of admiration.

The mother of Saint Clare (said) how, when she was expecting the child and was standing before the Crucifix praying for help in the dangers of childbirth, she heard a voice which told her that she was to bring forth a great light which would greatly enlighten the world.

– “Canonisation Process,” *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*

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For centuries, Saint Clare stood in the shadow of her spiritual master. No doubt she would have wished it that way. But studies undertaken during the past few years reveal a person who merits particular attention, if only because it adds another coloration and texture to the rich Franciscan tapestry. What can we learn by considering the varied influences on her chosen life of poverty and joy?

A full answer would require exploration of her entire life and the precise circumstances in which her beliefs and religiosity developed. I chose here rather to focus on a particular influence that has intrigued me for some time.

There is no doubt that the spirituality of Saint Francis was and always remained the foundation of her own worldview, theology and religious practice. But like Saint Francis, she constantly hungered for the Gospel. In *The Legend of Saint Clare*, we read, “She provided for her children, through dedicated preachers, the nourishment of the Word of God and from this she did not take a poorer portion.”

Like many of her contemporaries, liturgy was her chief source of spiritual nourishment. She would hear the word both read and commented. The Holy Spirit would guide her attention to focus on certain expressions or images. For Saint Clare, poverty, humility and charity were three qualities to be ceaselessly

contemplated in Christ, observed in humanity and lived in discipleship. Her intense observation of poverty in the Incarnation and Passion of her Lord, both the fruit of God's own humility and charity, led her to feel compassion for her Saviour, and to choose that path in solidarity, and then to feel a similar charity for humanity affected by poverty that is not of its choosing.

Contemplation and compassion were linked too in an ancient tradition dating back to the Fathers of the Church. The bishops, priests and friars who preached to the Poor Ladies would surely have transmitted a familiarity with patristic thought. Among these would surely have been neighbouring Cistercians. We might also add the influence of the Victorines who certainly had an impact on the writings of Saint Bonaventure.

In the prologue to his book on the tradition commonly associated with the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris during the 12th century, Steven Chase writes, "In Victorine spirituality contemplation gives birth to charity... We can look at the parts of Victorine spirituality metaphorically as a set of mirrors. Each mirror reflects back upon the whole: contemplation, compassion and charity."

He concludes, "As with the majority of Christian spiritual traditions, Victorine spirituality finds its most ecstatic intimacy in Trinitarian and Christocentric reality... each (experience) leads to a single possible response: humble compassion. At its most basic, Victorine compassion leads us always forward toward an ever-growing expectation of the holiness of all things."

According to Marco Bartoli, the theology of Saint Clare has many fascinating dimensions. These gravitate around two principal poles: Christ as mirror and example, and Mary as sign of spiritual motherhood.

Saint Francis had emphasised the need for brothers and sisters of the order to serve as an example and mirror of Gospel living but Saint Clare carried the image of mirror much further and applied it explicitly to Christ. The images of Jesus both as a most holy and beloved child as well as the Crucified One were important both as mirror and example. These led logically to the theme of the mystical marriage which is most evident in her letters to Blessed Agnes of Prague who is a fascinating person in her own right. Born of King Ottakar of Bohemia and Queen Constance of Hungary, she entered the order of Poor Ladies and began to correspond with Saint Clare.

The image of mystical marriage led Saint Clare directly to a development of Marian spirituality. The emphasis on marriage and motherhood distinguishes hers from the spirituality of Saint Francis. That is perhaps not surprising, given their respective genders. But it may also suggest the dominant influence of Cistercian theology in that it resonates with the work of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. Nonetheless, the coloration is typically Franciscan. Mary is portrayed as a poor woman, the mother of a poor child.

Inasmuch as this vision of him is the splendour of eternal glory, the brightness of everlasting light and an unspotted mirror, look into this mirror every day... Look at the parameters of this mirror, that is, the poverty of him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes... Then in the depths of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity which led him to suffer on the wood of the Cross and die thereon the most shameful kind of death.

– Saint Clare of Assisi, *Fourth Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague*

Keith Warner argues that three things distinguish the spirituality of Saint Clare from that of other religious women of her day: poverty, contact with her Franciscan brothers, and enclosure: “It was not new for women to want to dedicate themselves to God in prayer, but it was to do so without the security of land and possessions. It was not common for cloistered women to have spiritual friendships with religious men, or to have a cloister that permitted women to travel outside a monastery. Yet these were issues that Clare felt very strongly about, and defended vigorously.”

Saint Clare chose enclosure freely. Prayer was her chosen path. But it was not to be expressed without a fraternal regard toward visitors and the outside world. Exposure to the brothers, though carefully regulated, would ensure the bond needed to remain faithful to Franciscan family values. Church officials tried on two major occasions to prohibit friars from being their preachers and confessors but she resisted by fasting and succeeded to maintain the fraternal link.

But it is the virtue of poverty that caused the most controversy. Saint Clare believed that an uncompromising commitment to poverty was essential for the imitation of Christ, which was an attitude that was central to Saint Francis’s own relationship with God. The Church, including every pope that ruled during her lifetime, was ambivalent, sometimes objecting, sometimes approving.

Saint Clare was afflicted by illness during the last 28 years of her life, often on the brink of death. Claiming and holding on to the “privilege of poverty” was a source of both anguish and consolation. Innocent IV granted her wish in her final days. But the pain, now entirely physical, continued. Bartoli writes, “The longer her agony went on the greater grew the popular devotion. San Damiano became a shrine. After the pope, came prelates and bishops. Clare received them all.”

During her final days, three of earliest brothers of Saint Francis were her comfort—Juniper, Angelo and Leo. They surely reminded her of her beloved mentor. Her final solemn blessing was a mother’s simple and sincere expression of love for her sisters. It bursts forth with confidence in God and the biblical counsel of poverty.

Finally she turned to her weeping daughters to whom she recalled in a praising way the divine blessings while entrusting them with the poverty of the Lord. She blessed her devoted brothers and sisters and called down the fullest graces of blessings upon the Ladies of the poor monasteries, those in the present and those in the future.
“Canonisation Process,”

– Clare of Assisi: *Early Documents*

APRIL 2010

Saint Francis serves for many as a clear, although challenging, example of faithful Christian discipleship. Many people are attracted to his spirituality, judging from the impressive array of new books that continue to appear year after year. Most people focus on his small collection of writings and, to a greater degree, on often romanticised ideas of his religious values and personal priorities. Few would imitate his lifestyle. Even fewer have lived the charism of poverty and the practice of mendicancy as authentically as Saint Benedict Joseph Labre (1748-1783).

Saint Benedict was a serious boy, inclined to solitude but not, it is noted by at least one biographer, lacking in joy. The firstborn of 15 children in a middle-class family, he lived and was educated in the diocese of Boulogne, France.

At the age of 16, he decided to dedicate his life to God. At first, he experienced a series of disappointments. The Trappists refused him because of his age; the Carthusians because of ill health; and other religious communities for reasons that are not clear. He then decided to set out and live as a permanent pilgrim. Leaving his native town of Amettes, he lived by begging and eating discarded food. His aim was to visit churches and shrines, which he did by covering several countries in Europe over a period of many years. As this was his true vocation, he was filled with great peace.

A rosary about his neck, another between his fingers, a crucifix lay upon his breast. In a small bag he carried a New Testament, a breviary, a copy of the Imitation of Christ. Dressed in rags and unwashed, he was avoided, although this seemed to suit his solitary nature. People would offer him alms, which he sometimes gave to those he felt were more in need than he was. Because of his appearance and apparent disregard for what mattered to others, he was mocked and rebuked by some. But he was admired by others, even seen as a living saint. His confessor thought him to be educated in theology. But when asked, he responded in characteristic humility: "I am only a poor ignorant beggar."

Eventually, he settled in Rome, spending his nights sleeping in the Coliseum and his days in the city's numerous churches. But asceticism had already taken its toll. Increasingly frail, Saint Benedict collapsed on the steps of a church and was carried to a nearby house. He died April 16, 1783. His reputation as a saint spread across Europe almost immediately, although he was only canonized a century later.

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.

– 1 Corinthians 1: 19

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Saint Benedict was apparently concerned about neither the fashions nor the judgements of society but only his relationship with God. Living without property, his only security was fellowship with the poor and the crucified Christ. Early in his sojourn, he visited Assisi. As he already lived in the image of Saint Francis, he was received into the Confraternity of the Cord and known as a "cordbearer," a term referring to the coarse cord worn by Saint Francis of Assisi. The society of cordbearers had been established in 1585 by the Franciscan Pope Sixtus V. As a result of his favour and that of subsequent popes, members enjoyed certain privileges, as witness the string of chapels found in various parts of Europe.

Cordbearers were assumed to recite daily prayers, be temperate and pure, and wear the cord, which would remind them of their bond to God and his commandments. (The word “cordbearer” was sometimes applied to all Franciscans, religious and secular. In Paris, the French word “cordelier” was even associated after the French Revolution by Danton, Desmoulins and Marat with a group of oenophiles, adopting their name from “Le couvent des Cordeliers.”)

In religious life, the cord bears three knots, symbolizing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In a manner of speaking, cordbearers too were marked by these signs. Secular Franciscans are called to simplicity, modesty in dress and lifestyle. In the case of married people, fidelity rather than abstinence is the chosen form of chastity. The cord serves as a reminder of obedience inasmuch as it recalls that Jesus warned Saint Peter, “When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (John 21: 20)

Franciscan spirituality is inevitably lived differently in practice from one historical period to another but there is something essential of its charism that endures. For my part, three words incarnate the spirit of religious vows, namely simplicity, gratitude and generosity. These are watchwords for my life. Simplicity is a more contemporary expression of poverty but its demands are no less challenging. The poet T.S. Eliot wrote that it costs “nothing less than everything.” It is actualized only in the most radical form of detachment.

The Franciscan intuition has prized poverty as one of the most challenging virtues. In many ways, its merit is counter-intuitive. How can pruning something make it grow? But mysteriously, it does. There is plenty of evidence of this in the spiritual life. The best evidence is the other remarkable quality of Franciscan life: joy. How can voluntary poverty and true joy co-exist? Yet they do.

Like chastity, gratitude is a quality of living that reserves everything for its intended purpose. Gratitude grows consciousness and discourages abuse. Gratitude enables us to focus on what is true and valuable. It is the heart of prayer. In effect, it is only possible when simplicity orders what is needed and liberates us of insatiable appetites. Gratitude causes the heart to overflow. The sense of abundance that stems from gratitude produces generosity, which makes obedience possible. Attentiveness to others requires graciousness and a willingness to govern our selfish instincts.

The friars should be glad to live among social outcasts, among the poor and helpless, the sick and the lepers, and those who beg by the wayside.

– Saint Francis, *The Rule of 1221*

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Dorothy Day was a worldly, fun-loving journalist living in New York. She would probably have never known God had it not been for the rude eruption of Peter Maurine in her life. Due to a combination of goading and inspiration, she opened a soup kitchen to help alleviate suffering and despair during the Great Depression. Then, she founded the Catholic Worker, at first a newspaper that preached the social gospel on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised, then a lay movement with houses of hospitality to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and finally farming communes to foster the emergence of a communitarian economy.

Peter understood the necessity of sharing. He was born into a peasant Languedoc family of 23 children. At the age of 32, he sailed to the United States where he spent the next 20 years moving from one labour job to another, breaking rocks, building roads, all the while dreaming of the realization of gospel values in economics and politics.

Filled with the spirit of the Beatitudes, Peter spent the last years of his life stripped of what he valued most, his mind. Severely disabled by a stroke, he was unable to think clearly, dress or feed himself. Dorothy was inspired by his gracious acceptance of this condition. As he was often confused, she placed on his lapel a note that read “I am Peter Maurin, founder of the Catholic Worker movement.”

Dorothy always credited Peter with the inspiration for her life after she met him in 1932. One wonders what would have come of her life, not to mention to the millions of people who have been served by her followers ever since had it not been for this disturbing vagabond, this philosophizing fool for Christ, so well-cast in the movie *Entertaining Angels*, as the image of Saint Francis and Saint Benedict Joseph Labre. The question could reasonably be asked as well, did the presence of the latter in the days of political foment leading to the French Revolution inspire people to act in Europe as Dorothy did generations later, an ocean away?

There stands still today in south-central Montreal a house of hospitality established in 1952 as part of the Catholic Worker network. Benedict Labre House originally served the residents of a working-class neighbourhood that was predominantly Irish. Now its reach extends to a wider and more diverse population.

The world would become better off if people tried to become better. And people would become better if they stopped trying to become better off.

– Peter Maurin

MAY 2010

I must admit to a bias in selecting Saint Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444) for this month's Franciscan reflection on Beautiful Lives. He is the patron of public relations practitioners. Notwithstanding the nefarious reputation with which the practice is sometimes associated, I confess to have earned my own living in this field.

Saint Bernardine lost his parents at a young age. He studied theology and canon law before joining the Franciscans in 1402. The particular branch that he joined was then known as the Observants, which is part of the ancestry of today's Friars Minor. The Observance (Regularis Observantia), signifying a more radical return to the rule regarding poverty, prepared the ground for a regeneration of the order. At first a fragmented movement, varying in different lands, it was given a definite character by Saint Bernardine of Siena and Saint John Capistran.

Three times, Saint Bernardine was invited to the episcopate. Three times he declined respectfully. His true vocation was preaching. His abilities as a communicator were noted by everyone, as was his holiness. His mission was to invite people to "repent and believe in the gospel." When we hear this verse today, we know that the Gospel is indeed good news and that this belief leads precisely to conversion. It is good that we have communicators to remind us of the richness of the Gospel and how it reaches into every aspect of our lives. When we read or listen to well-grounded commentary on Scripture, we taste and see the goodness of the Lord; we benefit from his providence.

Saint Bernardine was canonized only six years after his death, and his feast is marked on May 20.

He hoped they would live up to the name by which they were saved and would, in the words of Saint Paul, "live worthy of your calling." (Eph 4:1)

– Patrick McCloskey, *Franciscan Saint of the Day*

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Saint Bernardine was both a holy man and an able communicator. Pope Pius II called him "a second Paul." The Catholic Encyclopaedia points out that he is also referred to as "the apostle of Italy." It is said that Saint Bernardine was the greatest preacher of his day, drawing tens of thousands of people to hear him in any given location. As a communicator, he was ahead of his time, using multi-media strategies to impress and inspire the people. He used plain speech, banners, rallies and processions.

Living in an age of deep social divisions caused by power and fear, the issues with which he dealt primarily were luxury and extravagance as these are often the causes or effects of sin. Today, we would find him eccentric for the bonfires in which people would be invited to throw playing cards, perfume and high-heeled shoes, but we must bear in mind that mass presentation of gospel messages was in its infancy. As today, astute preachers sought to move listeners from passivity to action.

Mercifully, "the devil's castle," as he called his bonfires, has not endured to our day, but his emblematic rallying theme has prevailed. Looking for a way to move Italians beyond the factions of region and class, Saint Bernardine proposed a single unifying name, the Holy Name of Jesus. He had banners made with

the letters YHS, which we see mostly today as IHS, abbreviation of the Greek word for Jesus. He organized processions, using these banners.

The Catholic Encyclopaedia notes that “in spite of his popularity — perhaps rather on account of it — Bernardine had to suffer both opposition and persecution. He was accused of heresy, the tablets he had used to promote devotion to the Holy Name being made the basis of a clever attack by the adherents of the Dominican, Manfred of Vercelli, whose false preaching about Antichrist Bernardine had combated. The saint was charged with having introduced a profane, new devotion which exposed the people to the danger of idolatry, and he was cited to appear before the pope.

“This was in 1427. Martin V received Bernardine coldly and forbade him to preach or exhibit his tablets until his conduct had been examined. The saint humbly submitted, his sermons and writings being handed over to a commission and a day set for his trial. The latter took place at St. Peter’s in presence of the pope, 8 June, St. John Capistran having charge of the saint’s defence. The malice and futility of the charges against Bernardine were so completely demonstrated that the pope not only justified and commended the saint’s teaching, but urged him to preach in Rome.”

Innovation is never well received initially. Even when it is brilliant, change triggers antibodies in all social bodies. That is normal and even necessary. Conformity is the glue that binds any community. But conformity that stifles creativity soon extinguishes life because development is the vitality of any organism, including a faith tradition.

The name of Jesus is the glory of preachers, because the shining splendour of that name causes his word to be proclaimed and heard. And how do you think such an immense, sudden and dazzling light of faith came into the world, if not because Jesus was preached? Was it not through the brilliance and sweet savour of this name that “God called us into his marvellous light” (1 Pt 2:9)?

– Saint Bernardine of Siena, *Sermon #49*

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The efficacy of any communication is enhanced or diminished by the integrity of the speaker’s behaviour. Saint Bernardine was a holy man. But what do we mean by that term?

I recently spent 10 days in Oxford, UK. That had not been my plan but I was “stranded” there after a volcano in Iceland spewed a cloud of ash so large that it grounded flights out of many European cities for almost a week. Like blessings, I became the beneficiary of many unexpected surprises while I was there, including a visit to St. Mary the Virgin. It was from the pulpit still standing there that John Henry Newman, Vicar of the University Church, packed the nave for his sermons. He later converted to Roman Catholicism and was made a Cardinal in 1879.

Cardinal Newman had an interesting perspective, which merits our attention here, especially this year as we prepared to mark his beatification. In a sermon devoted to Saint Paul, speaking about those “of the highest order of sanctity,” he proffered, “They have the thoughts, feelings, frames of mind, attractions, sympathies of other men, so far as these are not sinful, only they have these parts of human nature purified, sanctified, and exalted; and they are only made more eloquent, more poetical, more profound, more

intellectual, by reason of their being more holy.” Here Cardinal Newman was not speaking of being “not sinful” as immaculate behaviour. In fact, we recall that Saint Paul persecuted Christians and was plagued by behaviour of which he was ashamed. Rather, he is referring to sincerity and passion for doing what is virtuous insofar as one understands the good.

In another sermon, meditating on “the means which God has provided for the creation of the Saint out of the sinner,” Cardinal Newman added, “He takes him as he is...He turns his affections into another channel, and extinguishes a carnal love by infusing a heavenly charity...He instructs him in the depravity of sin, as well as in the mercy of God; but still, on the whole, the animating principle of the new life, by which it is both kindled and sustained, is the flame of charity.”

My own view is that a saint is someone who welcomes God’s unconditional love and transformative grace. To do so is to consent to change. Conversion follows a particular course, including repentance for sins and loving engagement with others. Along the way, the person becomes increasingly conscious, more and more authentic.

As a preacher and a public relations practitioner, I visited the basilica dedicated to Saint Bernardine while in the lovely medieval city of Siena.

The Basilica dell’Osservanza, constructed during the 15th century on the site of an old hermitage, was restored in accordance with the original using the same construction materials after its destruction by aerial bombardment in 1944. In the church and in the added monastery numerous keepsakes of the Saint are treasured. The Oratory of St. Bernardine is to be found in the Piazza S. Francesco where Saint Bernardine in 1425 held a cycle of his sermons. This Oratory is an admirable repository of beautiful architectural and decorative works of the Sienese Renaissance, which are fitting tributes to the use of beauty in evangelization. Saint Bernardine used everything at his disposal to speak of God’s love.

Everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved. But how can they call to him for help if they have not believed? And how can they believe if they have not heard the message? And how can they hear the message if it is not proclaimed?

– Saint Paul, *Letter to the Romans 10: 13-14*

JUNE 2010

In September of 1222, a group of Dominicans and Franciscans were gathered together at the cathedral in Forlì, near Bologna, in the north-central region of Emillie-Romagna, for the ordination of members of their community. For some reason, no one had been chosen beforehand to preach. Saint Anthony was asked to do so once the others had declined. He accepted in obedience. As his sermon progressed in articulate Latin, the words became more and more entrancing, and showed profound knowledge of the Gospel.

Saint Anthony had begun his religious life as an Augustinian Friar in his native Portugal. When he witnessed the return of the first Franciscan friars from Morocco, he decided to join the ranks of the new order. As an Augustinian priest, he had received rigorous training in theology.

After the revelation of his abilities at Forlì, his superiors asked him to preach in the other towns and villages of the Italian region. Romagna was troubled by civil war. As well, heretical groups were attracting more and more followers. One group promoted fierce anti-clericalism and a form of dualism that divided the world into matter, which it viewed as intrinsically evil, and mind or spirit, which it understood as being intrinsically good. This belief runs contrary to Christian doctrine as it flies in the face of teaching regarding the Incarnation.

As a result, such groups cut themselves off from society in order to avoid contamination from worldly people. In a way, they were moved by the same intuition as Saint Francis of Assisi to reject property and take up the ascetic life. But unlike them, Saint Francis and Saint Anthony were passionately faithful to the clergy, and they argued that there is much good in the physical world and that there exists a degree of evil in the mind. Saint Anthony spoke persuasively and effectively about Catholic orthodoxy.

I recently read an interesting doctoral dissertation that shows the many theological, spiritual and historical influences that bore upon his thought and preaching style. Among these were Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh St. Victor. As varied as these influences were, however, his heart no less Franciscan.

The author concludes,

“Beyond the particular theological issues he discusses, Antony reveals himself as a passionate critic of abuse in the Church, yet always animated by a spirit of charity and kindness. He shows a real affection for the ‘dear brothers’ to whom the work is offered, and an enthusiasm both for Biblical study and for the Book of Nature which also reveals God.”

In all these ways, Saint Anthony was a worthy son of the poverello.

I warn and exhort the friars that in preaching that they do their expressions be considered and chaste for the sake of utility and edification of the people by announcing to them vices and virtues, punishment and glory, with brevity of speech, since a brief word did the Lord speak upon the earth.

– Saint Francis, *The Rule of 1223, Chapter IX*

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The role of Saint Anthony as preacher cannot be separated from that of teacher. Toward the end of the year 1223, Saint Anthony was invited to teach theology in the city of Bologna. From the age of 28 to 30, he taught the fundamentals of the Catholic faith to clergy and laypeople using a simple but efficient method: He first read a sacred text and then interpreted it in an engaging way. He was, in fact, the first teacher of theology of the newly established Franciscan Order—the first link in a chain of theologians, preachers and writers, who over the centuries have brought honour to the Church.

At the beginning, Saint Francis was hesitant about his brother friars dedicating themselves to the study of theology. It seems that Saint Francis' initial hesitation regarding the study of theology reflected the mistrust that often existed between the learned and the unlearned of his day. Saint Francis never wanted his brother friars to forget humility. But given Saint Anthony's solid foundation in doctrine and his moral integrity, an exception was made.

The authenticity of the following letter sent to him by Saint Francis is now widely accepted by scholars. It reads, "To brother Anthony, my bishop, I wish you health. I approve of your teaching theology to the brothers, provided that, on account of this study, you do not diminish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion, as is ordained in the Rule. Be well."

One might wonder what would a theology, or for that matter, a homiletics lesson with Saint Anthony have been like? According to the methods of the time, which he followed, allegory played an important role in explaining doctrine, as did constant references to the Bible. This style encouraged clarity, simplicity, a concern to be persuasive and practical, and involvement of the rational and emotional aspect of the human person. The objective was to persuade the listener to apply biblical dictates in daily life.

Among his contemporaries and in the generations immediately afterwards, Saint Anthony was held to be an unequalled biblical scholar. One historian says that Saint Anthony possessed such eminent knowledge that he was able to use his memory instead of books, and he knew how to express himself with abundant grace in mystical language.

The Roman Curia welcomed Saint Anthony to preach to them, and afterwards Pope Gregory IX complemented him by calling him "the Ark of the Testament." In 1931, the seven-hundredth anniversary of St. Anthony's death, the Congregation of Rites discussed his preaching and teaching. They declared, "The cult of Doctor, attributed for centuries to Saint Anthony of Padua, is to be confirmed and extended into in the liturgical office of the universal Church."

Pope Pius XII had the honour of affirming this title on January 16, 1946, with the Apostolic Letter 'Rejoice, happy Portugal.' Indeed, Saint Anthony remains for us today a model of zealous preaching of the Gospel. He is "doctor evangelicus." His use of various techniques did not deter him from the Gospel but rather reinforced his mission.

The employment of 'concordances' enables Antony to build a fuller treatment of a topic than the often slender Gospel foundation would allow by itself.

– SRP Spilsbury, *The Concordance of Scripture: The Homiletic and Exegetical Methods of St. Antony of Padua*

There are countless books written about preaching in the Catholic tradition. One in particular, by Capuchin author Richard Hart leaves no doubt about the qualities that are essential to effective homiletics by the very titles given to chapters: homily preparation is non-negotiable, becoming a pray-er, lighting a fire, creativity, good imagery, simple language, illustrations, storytelling, persuasion, humour, the preacher as prophet, biblical preaching and the Gospel well proclaimed.

One of my preferred authorities on preaching is Walter Burghardt SJ. He confesses that the influences on his preaching come from a range of sources as eclectic as the Fathers of the Church, John Henry Newman and a handful of contemporary protestant preachers, particularly Frederick Buechner and Joseph Sittler.

Like Hart, Burghardt emphasized the necessity of sound and evocative imagery. I think that this makes the difference between a message that appeals to the heart or to the mind (or neither), and one that appeals to both. The mind demands that the image be sound; the heart needs it to be evocative. The combination spells effectiveness: a lasting impression that motivates action. This is, for me, the test of a good homily. Is it both informational and inspirational? Have I learned something and will my acceptance of the message cause conversion?

Effective preaching is costly because it costs me my life: my mind, my spirit, my flesh and blood.

– Walter Burghardt, Preaching: *The Art and The Craft*

JULY 2010

The question that often arises regarding Franciscan spirituality is how a person can live in a world that is often defined and regulated by money. Perhaps more fundamentally, can a person with a sizeable personal fortune be an authentic Franciscan? Certainly, the question does not apply to members of the religious orders founded by Saint Francis of Assisi—the Franciscans, the Capuchins, the Conventuals, the Poor Clares, or even the members of the Third Order Regular, such as the Friars of the Atonement or the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. But it does apply to the thousands of people who are professed members of the Secular Franciscan Order as well as to the legions of people who are favourably disposed to the spirituality of Saint Francis. Fortunately we have a number of examples from which to draw. My favourite is the beautiful life of Saint Thomas More (1478-1535).

Early on, Saint Thomas is said to have considered the life of the Carthusians and that of the Observant Franciscans, both reputed for the severity of their rule. In both cases, it was judged that this was not his true vocation. He embraced the spirituality of Saint Francis, nonetheless, by becoming a Tertiary, a member of the Third Order of Saint Francis, known today as a Secular Franciscan. He maintained a pious life, as he had from childhood, attending mass daily. He is said to have devoted Fridays to spiritual recollection.

According to an online anthology of English literature, Saint Thomas was born in Milk Street, London on February 7, 1478, son of Sir John More, a prominent judge. He was educated at Saint Anthony's School in London. As a youth he served as a page in the household of Archbishop Morton, who anticipated More would become a "marvellous man." More went on to study at Oxford, during which time, he wrote comedies and studied Greek and Latin literature. One of his first works was an English translation of a Latin biography of the Italian humanist Pico della Mirandola. During his life, he produced a variety of works, including poems and various defences of Catholic doctrine. His most often noted writing, however, is *Utopia*, which includes references to government, learning, marriage, afterlife and religion in an idealized setting.

Saint Thomas was a prominent figure in a pivotal moment of English history but what stands out for us today is that he was a man of solid faith, resilient hope and grounded love. During the years of the Reformation, he was a man of great power and possession, first as a successful lawyer. Then he became attached to the royal court of King Henry VIII, finally being appointed Lord High Chancellor, the equivalent of the office of Prime Minister. Publicly he enjoyed the reputation of an honest and just person; privately, he was known as a prayerful man, a faithful friend and a caring family man, never compromising truth for expediency or personal satisfaction.

Attendance at daily mass was a key part of his private life. Apparently he was once criticised for this as it was supposedly unfitting for a lay person with so many distractions to receive communion so frequently. His response was characteristically wise and witty: "You are advancing the very reasons for the need of frequent holy Communion. If I am distracted, holy Communion helps me to become recollected. If opportunities are offered time me each day to offend my God, I arm myself anew each day for the combat by the reception of the Eucharist. If I am in special need of light and prudence in order to discharge my burdensome duties, I draw nigh to my Saviour and seek counsel and light from him."

Thomas More was canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1935.

Man's folly has enhanced the value of gold and silver because of their scarcity; whereas nature, like a kind parent, has freely given us the best things, such as air, earth, and water, but has hidden from us those which are vain and useless.

– Saint Thomas More, *Utopia*

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There is perhaps nothing more emblematic of the detachment of Saint Thomas More in relation to wealth as his willingness to cede his life in the name of a higher value. In this regard, it must be understood that Saint Thomas was not only knowledgeable of doctrine but also astute in the ways of the world. For instance, in *Utopia*, he noted, “What you cannot turn to good, you must at least make as little bad as you can.” This reveals the wisdom of someone who is steeped in the affairs of the world while mindful of the exigencies of the Gospel. That is why his is such an important life for us to consider, a sign of hope in an age of radicalism.

One of my all-time favourite movies is *A Man for All Seasons*, produced in 1966 with an awesome cast, including Paul Scofield, Orson Well, Susannah York and John Hurt. It is a masterful study of pragmatic piety, ethical argumentation and human frailty masquerading as personal and national honour and courage. It also is, in my humble option, one of the most telling accounts of genuine martyrdom. It stands apart from the syrupy hagiography that too often passes as a worthy tribute to sainthood attained by the shedding of blood in the name of truth as a martyr.

Martyr is a harsh word. It strikes fear in those of us who can imagine a time, perhaps not so remote, and a place, not so distant, when there is no time for equivocation, no space for hypocrisy. A person must cast a decisive vote and suffer the consequences. We often misuse the word. We use it to signify self-sacrifice that is inordinate, sometimes pathological, or victimization, real or imagined. Its true meaning is rather simpler.

According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, the Greek word *martus* signifies a witness who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation. It is in this sense that the term first appears in Christian literature; the Apostles were “witnesses” of all that they had observed in the public life of Christ, as well as of all they had learned from “His teaching in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) Soon enough, the word is reserved to describe “witnesses” who give an account of what they believe to be the truth at the risk of being killed.

Such was the case of Saint Thomas. He refused to swear to the Act of Succession and the Oath of Supremacy, and was committed to the Tower of London. As a result, he was charged with treason and beheaded alongside Bishop Fisher on July 6, 1535.

Saint Thomas had great wealth and power. His was a life of prestige and privilege. Yet these were for him but the instruments of his vocation. He was ordained to a life of leadership, both socially and morally. He ascended to a political role that allowed him to apply to the best of his abilities religious beliefs to daily life in an overwhelmingly secular environment. In his case, and in the case of all persons who are focused on value, power accords the opportunity to affect the lives of thousands if not millions of people by impressing upon them the meaning of a life and death that is animated by a profound love and a resolute quest of truth.

Generally, clinging to wealth and power is a sign of the insecurity that lurks within each of us. It is a rare person who can dismiss this deeply ingrained impulse and virtually disregard the judgement of others regardless of stage of life or circumstance. Saint Thomas More was such a man.

I do not care very much what men say of me, provided that God approves of me.

– Saint Thomas More in a letter to Erasmus

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What is the lesson that we are to learn from the life of Saint Thomas regarding the evangelical counsel of poverty in the reality of secular lives that require the legitimate use of possessions, prestige and power? The answer is simple in theory and difficult in practice. We are not to fear or abuse money or property that can serve the greater good, nor are we to love them as something to hoard or hinder the development of loving relationships.

It is the love of money that is the source of much sin and suffering, not inanimate coinage. Currency, by definition, is not an end but a means, which can be either constructive or destructive. The purity of our intentions and the ethics of our behaviour matter far more than balances and portfolios. It is often said that if we could hold God's gifts with an open hand instead of a closed fist, the world be a better place. If we could see what we receive as something to share, we would have more peace and joy. Saint Thomas understood that this applies to everything, even life itself.

Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.

– Luke 17: 33

AUGUST 2010

The Catholic Church concluded a few weeks ago the Year for Priests. It was also a year to celebrate the variety of ways of living the Franciscan life. Saint John Mary Vianney (1786-1859) serves as a good example of how Franciscan spirituality can animate the diocesan priesthood.

Born near Lyons shortly before the outbreak of the French Revolution, he was a deeply prayerful person. Soon after his ordination to the priesthood in 1815, he became a parish priest and earned a reputation for his humility and devotion to the sacrament of Reconciliation. The curé d'Ars, as he is still known now, is said to have spent up to 18 hours each day in the confessional, hearing people who had come from near and far to experience God's mercy through the particular charism of this self-effacing man.

According to one account, he slept very little, rising during the night to hear confessions before 7 a.m. mass and returning to the confessional for most of the day and evening afterwards, except for brief periods to provide religious instruction and to visit the sick.

In an article in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, we read that "the chief labour of the curé d'Ars was the direction of souls." From this, we see that he understood the full meaning of reconciliation. It is noted that "his advice was sought by bishops, priests, religious, young men and women in doubt as to their vocation, sinners, persons in all sorts of difficulties and the sick. In 1855, the number of pilgrims had reached twenty thousand a year. The most distinguished persons visited Ars for the purpose of seeing the holy curé and hearing his daily instruction. His direction was characterized by common sense and remarkable insight."

Though he was clearly effective in ministry, Saint John Vianney was more naturally inclined toward the contemplative life. In fact, he considered leaving the diocesan priesthood several times, but his bishop insisted that he remain in service to the parish community, which he did in obedience.

While thoughts of leaving for a quieter, simpler life were on his mind, he met with a venerable Capuchin in Lyons. He expressed a desire to join the order but the friar counselled him to stay in parish life. Nonetheless, rumours spread that he was planning to leave the parish in favour of becoming a Capuchin Franciscan. As the curé d'Ars persisted in his request, he was told about and joined the Third Order of Saint Francis, known today as the Secular Franciscan Order.

Saint John recommended both private and liturgical prayer for everyone. His instruction on prayer appears in the Office of Readings in the breviary. In it, he expressed his admiration for Saint Francis and Saint Colette (See my January reflection on Saint Colette of Corbie.) He wrote, "Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Colette saw Our Lord and spoke to him as we speak to one another."

The humble curé d'Ars, widely known for his pastoral zeal, died peacefully at the age of 73, exhausted by the pace of his ministry and the severity of his austerity. He was canonized by Pope Pius XI and made the patron of priests.

The Curé of Ars was very humble, yet as a priest he was conscious of being an immense gift to his people: "A good shepherd, a pastor after God's heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy".

– Quotation from “Le Sacerdoce, c’est l’amour du cœur de Jésus” in *Le curé d’Ars : Sa pensée, Son cœur*

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The association of the sacrament of reconciliation with Franciscan spirituality is no coincidence. Conversion is a pivotal concept in the life and writings of Saint Francis himself. Establishment of the order was part of a long-standing penitential movement. According to Raffaella Pazzelli, to understand penance as conversion and reconciliation as Saint Francis understood it, one must go all the way back to the prophets: To repent or convert means to return to the Lord (1 Sam 7:3). Conversion to God, therefore, means to turn one’s back on sin (Sir 17: 21-23.) Because human nature is what it is, this is a continuous process. Fr. Pazzelli is the author of an important work on the pre-Franciscan and Franciscan penitential movement, *St. Francis and the Third Order*.

He writes that modern scholars of “penitential spirituality” show how penance and conversion, or metanoia, which signifies a correction in the relationship with God by turning from vice to virtue, along with “works of mercy” have always been and must remain the characteristic elements of the spirituality of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance, that is, the Secular Franciscan Order. He might have added that this is equally true for non-professed persons set on following the intuition of the poverello.

Saint Francis is the exemplar of penitential life. Aside from the romantic and eccentric elements, what is most enduring is the fascination that his admirers have for his authentic struggle with the meaning and value of Gospel teachings that flow from the earthly life of Christ, and his willingness to change his own life in accordance with the insights that developed along the path of conversion. The poverello soon understood Christianity to be no spectator sport. Once seized by grace and imbued with the wisdom of the Christian message, there was no genuine option for him but radical change. Saint Francis understood the penitential life as a process of correcting the errors that deny us the peace and joy to which we are heirs by faith.

His chief contribution, I believe, was to give us a deeper understanding of conversion as the fruit of penance. In effect, as Fr. Pazzelli points out, penance characterizes secular Franciscan life just as surely as minority marks the life of religious Franciscans. Indeed, the early brotherhood, before the formal foundation of the order, was made up of men who “confessed with simplicity to be penitents from Assisi.” (Legend of the Three Companions)

Heirs of that great movement of evangelical life which the poenitentes de Assisio embraced, learn to live your vocation...as brothers and sisters of penance with an enlightened sense of conversion and of continuous renewal.

– Pope John Paul II

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The link made here between the Year for Priests and the spirituality of Saint Francis is particularly appropriate if one considers his fidelity to the priesthood. This is especially remarkable because this was an issue of definitive demarcation between the reform movement that he launched and those of countless others, most deemed heretical—the Cathari and the Waldesians, for instance. His loyalty, though evidently

to priests, was in reality to the Eucharist, which he understood to be the food of Christian life.

Priests were necessary and blessed, according to his understanding, because—by their holy orders—they are indispensable agents of two marvellous sacraments, Eucharist and penance. As a reformer, however, he was not blind to human failure. No doubt he found it painful to observe just how worldly and inadequate church leaders were. Nonetheless, his devotion to God had to include a deep respect for priests who represent the charity and mercy of Jesus, at least sacramentally. In his Letter to All the Faithful, he wrote,

“We must also confess all our sins to a priest and receive from him the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ... We should show respect for the clergy, not so much for them personally, if they are sinners, but by reason of their office, and their administration of the most holy Body and Blood of Christ which they sacrifice on the altar and who receive and administer to others.”

Priests and bishops, who live by evangelical principles, as modeled by Saint Francis, inspire us. They remind us of the always-relevant wisdom of the Gospel. Those who abuse the power vested in them by God not only discredit their office, they undermine the power of the Gospel that must be preached to be understood and applied by the faithful. Mostly, they must preach by the way they live. Saint Francis admonished his brothers with these words, “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

Clearly, Saint John Mary Vianney got the message. This was his prayer, “My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love you, I want my heart to repeat it to you as often as I draw breath.” We have no vast corpus of his homilies; we do have compelling evidence that he embodied the sacred heart of Jesus in his actions, in his service to sinners. In this way, he also calls all the baptised to share in the priesthood of Jesus by radiating his mercy and love in humble yet tireless ways. He also reminds us that we are to do so in ways that are consistent with our own circumstances, with our own God-given gifts. His service was of a very particular nature: mostly in the sacrament of reconciliation. Priesthood was his broad vocational category—or form of life—but reconciliation between penitents and God was his particular vocation.

Each of us has a particular way in which we are called to serve as instruments of God’s peace. The prayer of Saint Francis reminds us of the many ways of doing this, whether by offering hope, love, light, joy, etc. Each of us has a particular way of doing this in accordance with our identity, charisms and mission. Each of us is called to discern that role amid the confusion, ambivalence and pressures of our lives.

Saint John Vianney would counsel prayer to assist in the determination and clarification of our part in the living narrative of Christianity. Prayer is, at its best, an open-hearted conversation with God who is the author of our identity, the source of our charisms and the dispatcher of our mission.

My children, your hearts are small, but prayer enlarges them and renders them capable of loving God.

– Saint John Vianney, *An Instruction on Prayer*

SEPTEMBER 2010

It was on September 25, 1988, that Pope John Paul II declared Frederick Jansoone blessed. The beatification was significant in many ways. It crowned with glory the life of a friar who had distinguished himself in humility by his intelligence and gifted communication.

Blessed Frederic was born in 1838 in France, near the Belgian border, of wealthy Flemish farm parents, the youngest of thirteen children, some of whom later joined religious orders. He was nine when his father died. Despite financial hardships, Blessed Frederic ranked high among students at the college that he attended at Dunkirk. His studies were interrupted, however, by the financial ruin of his family. He took a job in the textile trade as a salesman. This choice appears to have been prophetic as he would later become a tireless promoter of the Holy Land.

After his mother died in 1861, the twenty-three-year-old experienced a strong desire to join the Franciscan order. He made his initial vows in 1865 and went on to study philosophy at Limoges and theology at Bourges. His first ministry assignment was in a make-shift hospital before serving on the front as a chaplain in the Franco-Prussian War.

He was co-founder and superior of the friary at Bordeaux, but responsibility for a community did not suit him. His gifts were best suited to preaching retreats, leading pilgrimages and writing in newspapers. In 1876, he asked to be transferred to the Holy Land. He served initially at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where he negotiated a framework for regulating services there and at the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, enabling Greeks, Latins, Roman Catholics, Armenians, Copts and Abyssinians to share these sacred places.

Soon after, Blessed Frederic was named assistant custos (guardian), a mandate of protection of holy sites that had been conferred on the Franciscan order as early as 1342. Father Frederic preached in the places made sacred by Jesus himself. He is remembered even to this day for reviving an old custom of having pilgrims make the Stations of the Cross throughout the streets of Jerusalem.

His ministry in Canada began as a fundraising tour in 1881. Diverted from this purpose in France, he travelled to “New France” on the basis of a chance encounter in Paris with Fr. Léon Provencher, a parish priest from Cap Rouge. Friar Frederic’s talents served him well and his joyful spirit made him much loved immediately. His sermons and talks were said to be filled with interesting facts about the Holy Land. Soon he would establish in Canada the Good Friday collection that still to this day finances maintenance and ministry works in the Holy Land.

Blessed Frederic left for a time to take up duties again as assistant custos in the Holy Land. But, before doing so, he tried to persuade the Franciscans—absent since the suppression of the Recollets in 1796—to return to Canada. He also worked tirelessly to build up the shrine dedicated to Our Lady at Cap-de-la-Madeleine until handing over responsibility in 1902 to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

When in Montreal, he lived in a small, humble room at St. Joseph’s Friary, which stood on René-Levesque Boulevard. His death on August 4, 1916, was marked as the passing of a “holy Father,” as he became known even to the archbishop of Quebec. Large crowds gathered as his remains were transported from Montréal to Trois-Rivières where he was buried.

The legacy of Blessed Frederic is quite remarkable. He travelled gladly, doing whatever was required, wherever his superiors sent him. He was a true disciple of Christ and spiritual son of Saint Francis. To him are owed the popular practice of the Way of the Cross in the Holy Land as well as in Canada, the durable rooting of a Marian shrine to Our Lady at Cap-de-la-Madeleine, the rapid expansion of Secular (Third-Order) Franciscan fraternities in Canada, the return of Franciscan friars to Canada, and books and articles on a wide variety of religious topics.

Go on your way... Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!"

– Luke 10: 3-5

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Franciscan custody of Holy Land sites dates to the earliest years of the order. In fact, the Province of the Holy Land was created at the very chapter meeting at which provinces were created in 1217—six years before the death of the founder, Saint Francis of Assisi, who visited the region for several months in 1219/1220. It was during this time that Saint Francis encountered the Sultan Melek el-Kamel. This inspired meeting occurred at the height of the Crusades, pitting the prophetic style of respectful dialogue against the ill-fated policy of brutal confrontation that was promulgated by the church's hierarchy.

When the last remaining Crusade stronghold fell into the hands of Muslim forces, some 70 years later, the Franciscans sought safety on the island of Cyprus. Yet, with the permission of Pope John XXII, friars would make two visits annually to Jerusalem and other sanctuaries in the land made sacred by the life of Jesus more than 1,000 years earlier. Despite difficulties, they ensured—as Franciscans do to this day—the maintenance of sanctuaries, totalling 50 today, and sacred rites.

The juridical constitution of the Custody of the Holy Land was established by the Bull of Pope Clement VI in 1342. In it, he thanks Robert d'Anjou, king of Naples, and Queen Sanche of Majorca for the donation of certain lands, to which was soon added property obtained from the sultan of Egypt.

The Custody's work extends over a wide area in the modern Middle East, served by some 300 friars from all continents, as well as many sisters from various congregations. Popular shrines in the custody of the Franciscans include those recalling the Annunciation at Nazareth, the birth of our Saviour at Bethlehem, and his death in Jerusalem. As well, we find in ancient Galilee and Judea those sites marking the lives of apostles and saints that are pillars of our religious tradition.

In keeping with Jesus' own life in the region, Franciscans have over the years also undertaken needed pastoral ministries, notably care of the poor. The friars also have strong roots in both big-city and village parishes of the region. Activities run along the same lines as those of parishes elsewhere in the world, with catechism, sacraments, youth work, the Franciscan secular order, prayer groups and lay associations, spiritual direction, social activities and social welfare activities.

Service to pilgrims is a key activity too. From the earliest days of Christianity, religious orders have helped people to discover the essence of heritage sites. In the Holy Land, that is the role of the Franciscans. The

Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the most important pilgrimage site of Christianity, receives millions of visitors annually.

People came running from everywhere, the crowds swelled, and were quickly joined as Living stones to the grand structure of this marvellous temple.

– Thomas of Celano, *The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*

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For most Catholics in Canada, the only exposure to the work of Franciscans in the Holy Land occurs on Good Friday when a special collection raises money for their work there. This annual appeal for financial support happens in parishes around the world. It is a sign of solidarity across time, recalling the foundational events of our faith more than 2,000 years ago—and space, uniting people of all nations inextricably.

To live according to Gospel values, some sense of solidarity is important. As the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* affirmed, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Beleaguered Christians in the perennially troubled Holy Land region are living witnesses to the reality that our spirituality is deeply incarnational. It is rooted in time and place. It holds in tension the archetypal human experiences of joy and grief.

In Canada, the Commissariat of the Holy Land, now located in Ottawa, promotes better understanding of the relevance to our own lives of the particular places where Christ lived and proclaimed the Gospel by the promotion of the ancient practice of pilgrimage to important shrines. It does this by creating interest in holy sites and by drawing attention to the vitality of Christian communities in these ancient lands—“the living stones where one meets the resurrected Christ.”

The Commissariat wants to foster a conscious and long-lasting solidarity between all parishes and religious communities and the world’s earliest Christian church: that of Jerusalem.

– Friar Gilles Bourdeau, OFM, Commissary of the Holy Land in Canada

OCTOBER 2010

October is a special month for those who have a particular interest in the spirituality of Saint Francis. This is the month in which the entire Church remembers the man who followed in the footsteps of Jesus Christ with remarkable courage, authenticity and passion. As well, it is an occasion to recall that the Franciscan tradition was also built by literally hundreds of men and women who are recognized by the church as saints and worthy of special attention.

October has an extra significance for me. It is the month in which I celebrate the anniversary of my profession as a secular Franciscan and my ordination as a permanent Deacon—the second event being deeply grounded in the first. The date on which I made my permanent profession, October 19, is the memorial of one such illustrious person, Saint Peter of Alcantara.

(This year, 2010, I will be joyfully celebrating the 15th anniversary of my diaconal ordination in Assisi on October 21. I ask for your prayers for continued faithful service to the Gospel.)

A few years ago, a friend gave me a 1952 edition of “A Golden Treatise of Mental Prayer” by the saintly Saint Peter of Alcantara. Making allowances for the outmoded style and anachronisms in some of its counsels, for the reader the book remains an admirable introduction to meditation and the spiritual life.

Among other things, Saint Peter was at one time spiritual director of the great Saint Teresa of Avila, reformer of the Carmelite order and doctor of the Church. In fact, Saint John was also a reformer as well as a mystic.

Hence it is we see that the highest aim of our theology is, that from it we may learn the way to the Supreme Good, and may make this life to become a ladder by which we may advance step by step to the eternal happiness awaiting us.

– Saint Peter of Alcantara, *A Golden Treatise of Mental Prayer*

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According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, Saint Peter was born in the Spanish town of Alcantara in 1499, and died on October 18, 1562. His father, Saint Peter Garavita, was the governor of Alcantara, and his mother was of the noble family of Sanabia.

After a course of grammar and philosophy, he was sent, at the age of fourteen, to the University of Salamanca. Returning home, he became a Franciscan in the convent of the Strict Observance (also known as “Discalced”) at Manxaretos in 1515. At the age of twenty-two he was sent to found a new community of the Strict Observance at Badajoz. He was ordained priest in 1524, and the following year made guardian of the convent of Saint Mary of the Angels at Robredillo.

A few years later he began preaching with much success. He preferred to preach to the poor, and his sermons, taken largely from the Prophets and Wisdom books, breathed the tenderest human sympathy.

Having been elected minister of Saint Gabriel’s province in 1538, Saint Peter set to work at once. At the

chapter of Plasencia in 1540 he drew up the Constitutions of the Stricter Observants, but his severe ideas met with such opposition that he renounced the office of provincial and into the mountains of Arabida in Portugal.

Soon, however, other friars came to join him, and several little communities were established. Saint Peter was chosen guardian and master of novices at the convent of Pallais. In 1560 these communities were erected into the Province of Arabida. Returning to Spain in 1553, he spent two more years in solitude, and then journeyed barefoot to Rome. He obtained permission from Julius III to found some poor convents in Spain under the jurisdiction of the general of the Conventuals.

Convents were established at Pedrosa, Plasencia, and elsewhere; in 1556 they were made a commissariat, with Saint Peter as superior, and in 1561, a province under the title of Saint Joseph. Not discouraged by the opposition and ill-success his efforts at reform had met with in Saint Gabriel's province, Saint Peter drew up the constitutions of the new province with even greater severity. The reform spread rapidly into other provinces of Spain and Portugal.

In Saint Teresa, Saint Peter perceived a soul chosen by God for a great work, and her success in the reform of Carmel was in great measure due to his counsel, encouragement, and defence. It was a letter from Saint Peter—dated April 14, 1562—that encouraged her to found her first “discalced” monastery at Avila in August of that year. Saint Teresa's autobiography is the source of much information regarding Saint Peter's life, work, and gifts of miracles and prophecy.

Perhaps the most remarkable of Saint Peter's graces were his gift of contemplation and the virtue of penance. Hardly less remarkable was his love of God, which was apparently at times so ardent as to cause him sensible pain and frequently rapt him into ecstasy. The poverty he practiced and enforced was as cheerful as it was real and often let the want of even the necessities of life be felt. In confirmation of his virtues and mission of reformation, God worked numerous miracles through his intercession and by his very presence.

He was beatified by Gregory XV in 1622, and canonized by Clement IX in 1669. Besides the Constitutions of the Stricter Observants and many letters on spiritual subjects, especially to Saint Teresa, he composed a short treatise on prayer, which has been translated into all the languages of Europe.

He does much in the sight of God who does his best, be it ever so little.

– Saint Peter of Alcantara

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The word “discalced” is foreign to us. The term applies to those religious congregations of men and women, the members of which go entirely barefooted or wear sandals. Today, it is difficult to imagine why there would be a fuss made of wearing no shoes.

“Discalced,” in fact, is synonymous with a return to simpler traditions. The impetus behind these reforms was generally a deep discontent with the prevalent, more relaxed application of original rules. In fact, “discalced” religious were often bitterly opposed by mainstream members of their orders.

Saint Francis and Saint Clare of Assisi introduced into the West the custom going unshod. Many, including the Carmelites, would later adopt this practice. Again, the Catholic Encyclopaedia sheds a light that is of particular interest to anyone looking for evidence of Franciscan influence up to modern times.

After the various modifications of the Rule of Saint Francis, the Observants adhered to the “primitive” custom of going unshod, and in this they were followed by the Minims and Capuchins. The Discalced Franciscans or Alcantarines, who prior to 1897 formed a distinct branch of the Franciscan Order, went without footwear of any kind. The followers of Saint Clare at first went barefoot, but later came to wear sandals and even shoes. The Colettines and Capuchin Sisters returned to the use of sandals.

Sandals were also adopted by the Camaldolese monks of the Congregation of Monte Corona (1522), the Maronite Catholic monks, the Poor Hermits of Saint Jerome of the Congregation of Blessed Saint Peter of Pisa, the Augustinians of Thomas of Jesus (1532), the Barefooted Servites (1593), the Discalced Carmelites (1568), the Feuillants (Cistercians, 1575), Trinitarians (1594), Mercedarians (1604), and the Passionists.

The trouble is that everyone talks about reforming others and no one thinks about reforming himself.

– Saint Peter of Alcantara

NOVEMBER 2010

Since joining the Secular Franciscan Order, I have often been subjected to annoying comments about our spirituality's supposed lack of intellectual sophistication. Remnants of religious rivalries, comments such as these are also borne in ignorance.

While it is true that the intellect is not the sole way of understanding God's self-revelation, nor is it even the most efficient one, Franciscan schoolmen have over the centuries made major contributions to Christian theology. One such luminary is the great Franciscan scholastic, Blessed John Duns Scotus, who died in Cologne, Germany in the month of November, 1308. He was only 42, which is young for a person who left such a significant mark on the Church's history. Had he lived longer, he would most surely have left us a body of work similar to that for which Saint Thomas Aquinas is remembered. Even so, the corpus that he managed to produce is insightful and inspiring.

Aside from the fact that he came from a wealthy farming family, we know very little about his early life. Evidently, he was attracted to the charism and order of Saint Francis of Assisi. In choosing John as his religious name, he was paying homage to the Evangelist and Apostle of Love. But he was also making a prophetic statement about his future role as a theologian, for the fourth Gospel is the most theologically sophisticated one, and about his epic proclamation of love as the ultimate path to truth.

Blessed John was one of the most important and influential philosopher-theologians of the High Middle Ages. His brilliantly complex and nuanced speculative thought earned him the nickname "the Subtle Doctor." As the Middle Ages came to an end, Scotus studies flourished.

Blessed John's work encompasses a wide range of topics, from natural theology to metaphysics to the theory of knowledge to ethics and moral psychology; from the divine essence as Trinity to creation and the person as *imago Dei* to the divine action in the Incarnation.

Blessed John continues to hold a central position among Franciscan thinkers chiefly for two reasons: First, he articulated philosophically the insight of Saint Francis on the beauty of creation as a gift from God. Second, he developed and enhanced the traditional Franciscan preference for love over knowledge as key to the human journey toward union with God.

Blessed John had a great deal to say about the importance of love in the understanding and exercise of faith. If we do nothing else to honor him, we do well to reflect on the place accorded in Scripture to this most important of all virtues, without which our evangelization is no more than the disturbance caused by a noisy gong or a clanging bell, and our actions do us no good.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

– John 13: 34

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All this reflecting about love as a way of knowing, about personhood and communion, leads me to add a

few words about a more contemporary yet—I believe—richly Scotian view, namely the opinion expressed in Jean Vanier’s 1998 Massey Lecture, published under the title, *Becoming Human*.

Vanier reminds us that love has many uses that are vital to human and social existence. Indeed, it could be said that Vanier is reminding us that love is the foundation for everything that is inspired by God.

For instance, Vanier stresses that love leads to revelation, such as in the self-awareness in a child; identity and giftedness; understanding, both of self and of others; communication, in that we are invited to articulate values; celebration, through the connection of heart to heart; empowerment, as meaning is made of life authentically in a safe environment; communion, because love is the only true bond; and forgiveness, of others but also our self, for healing of woundedness.

In May, I had occasion to spend some time in Oxford, UK. I had been to London in connection with my work at Health Partners International of Canada when the Iceland volcano spewed a large ash cloud that grounded airplanes for more than a week. The result for me was that a two-day visit to Oxford was transformed into a 10-day pilgrimage to the city where the Franciscan intellectual tradition came into being.

Along with virtually concurrent origins at the University of Paris, Oxford University was the home to Robert Grosseteste who became regent master at the Franciscan house of studies in Oxford in 1229, only three years after the death of Saint Francis. To his are added such names as Richard Rufus of Cornwall, John Pecham, Roger Bacon, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

As I stood in the official university chapel, St. Mary the Virgin, I gazed for a long time at the pulpit from which had preached John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and Blessed John Henry Newman, co-founder of the Oxford Movement, which eventually led to his adoption of Roman Catholicism. Then, to my left, I noticed a large bronze plaque that commemorates the teaching of Duns Scotus.

I have thought often since then about his insights, particularly on the place of Jesus in creation. As Kenan Osborne puts it (*The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*, 2003), “The incarnation is not a divine after-thought, occasioned by human sin, Rather, the incarnation has a firstness that coincides with the firstness of creation...the fecundity of Jesus.” To my mind, this places the Gospels at the heart of human understanding because the life of Jesus is a pivotal event in the evolution of humanity, a call to holiness through wholeness, the plenitude of creation. Jesus is not so much a saviour by his death as by his life, his witness to the truth of Love, which exacts a heavy price—costing nothing less than everything.

Jesus is not some superhero to be worshiped because of his superhuman abilities but as the exemplar of who we were created to be, the new Adam. This does not diminish the divinity of Jesus but glorifies his humanity: “Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...being born in human likeness. (Phil. 2: 6-7)

It is his willingness to undertake the enormous effort to harmonize the best of human philosophical reflection with the insights of revelation which qualifies him to be a significant partner in the theological dialogue of the 21st century.

– Mary Elizabeth Ingham, “John Duns Scotus: An Integrated Vision”, in *The History of Franciscan Theology*,

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The declaration of love over knowledge is not anti-intellectual, as some have suggested, but it is an objective statement about the limits of the intellect and the penetrating capacity of love as a means of knowing.

As well, Blessed John achieved three important things: He defended human freedom against those who would compromise with determinism. He promoted the Kingship of Christ. And he argued the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The seal of the Church's approval was placed on Blessed John's teaching on the universal primacy of Christ when the feast of Christ the King was instituted in 1925, and on the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary when the doctrine was solemnly proclaimed by the Church in 1854.

For me, Blessed John's reflections on the purpose of the incarnation may be the most compelling, including the freedom in which the Father acted in creation, of which the incarnation was an intended climax; in which Jesus acted in his final act on earth; and in which we are consequentially born and necessarily journey in faith.

While it is important for us to acknowledge Blessed John's intellectual brilliance, which was placed at the service of the human family and the Church, we do well to note that he was also humble and prayerful—the combination that Saint Francis wanted in any friar who studied.

The theology of Blessed John Duns Scotus was, as the spirituality of Saint Francis had been, dominated by love. That is our legacy as Franciscans: authentic love that is born of absolute freedom (the true meaning of evangelical poverty), and is expressed prayerfully and fraternally. It is the path by which we chose to know God, and to love and serve him.

May the teaching and example of Blessed John Duns Scotus help us to understand that we attain happiness, freedom and perfection by opening ourselves to God's gracious self-revelation in Christ Jesus.

– Pope Benedict XVI

DECEMBER 2010

I have been blessed to know Jesus, among other ways, through the Gospel of Saint Luke and through the life of Saint Francis. At the deepest level, these are linked. As well, they are tied inexorably to my own pilgrimage. Allow me to explain.

My return to the Roman Catholic Church occurred, after an absence of fifteen years, through a seemingly chance viewing in 1983 of *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, the film directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Despite its now-dated flower-child style, the romanticised biography of the little poor man of Assisi struck several chords in my heart, mind and unconscious. I remember being awestruck, inhaling every scene. It was, for me, an epiphany.

The film drove me to books about this enigmatic figure that seemed to call out to me, or maybe I should say to my deepest, long layered-over identity. I was incapable of resistance, despite years of rationalizing away doctrine and even faith.

It was then that I began to attend weekday masses at the local church, St. Ignatius of Loyola parish, the odd architecture that I had then known irreverently as “mounting armadillos”. I attended weekdays, careful to avoid the notice of neighbours or the commitment of Sunday service. I preferred the anonymity of a sparsely filled church.

Saint Francis pointed to the Gospels as a map that would lead to meaning and happiness. His life was a witness to the veracity of Luke’s Gospel, most notably, beginning with the Crib of the Incarnation and ending with the Cross of the Resurrection. Midway between the alpha and the omega, we find chapter 10, the warrant of Christian discipleship.

Chapter 10 opens with Jesus sending seventy-two disciples ahead of him, two by two, “like lambs into the midst of wolves,” and instructing them to travel lightly, without concern for privilege, power or possessions: “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.” Saint Francis took this admonition to heart. As a disciple of his beloved Jesus, he chose poverty in order to live by the evangelical counsel contained in this passage. He understood the necessity of not operating in the world alone but in fraternity, two or more friars mobilized to preach the good news in a world thirsting for justice and peace, and hungering for truth and love.

Jesus then thanks the Father “because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” Saint Francis did not oppose the use of reason, as some might suggest, but he understood its limits and favoured an intuitive kind of knowing, based on humility, obedience and authentic love.

We then read about the parable of the Good Samaritan, ending with these words, “Go and do likewise.” The Gospel passage is a parable but it describes aptly the ministry of Saint Francis. By his own account, The Testament, his spiritual transformation resulted from loving care of lepers. This was so foundational in his experience of conversion and to the charism of early Franciscans that, according to one writer, leprosaria served as the first novitiates of the order. Saint Francis embodied the preferential option for the poor, those wounded in their body, their mind or their soul.

Finally, we find Jesus visiting Martha and Mary, and learn that “the better part” of life is to sit at the Lord’s feet and listen to what he is saying. This familiar story about Martha fussing over details related to hospitality and Mary resting in contemplative union with Jesus makes two points, one about focus and the other about balance. Saint Francis’ own life demonstrates the value for balance between action without which faith is dead (cf. James 2: 14-26) and the necessity of rooting works in the love of God. It is said that Saint Francis divided his time equally between solitude and prayer, and preaching and serving the poor. And, like Jesus, he prayed before all significant activities.

Luke’s Gospel focuses on the role of Jesus to “preach the Good News to the poor,” and shows concern for all kinds of poverty. It opens with the birth, childhood, baptism and temptations of Jesus, all of which are directed to his public ministry: to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and liberation from oppression. This is the core message of Saint Francis. This is precisely his understanding of poverty; by its voluntary application, oppression is crushed and people are set free to look upon others lovingly in justice and peace. His regard for Jesus is based on his appreciation for the gift of this understanding and the grace that makes virtue and freedom possible.

Luke’s Gospel emphasizes joy. We see that from the outset: Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth, her song of praise, Zachariah’s words to his son John the Baptist, the attendance of the poor shepherds at the birth of Jesus are all enveloped in supernatural joy. Joy marked the life of Saint Francis. It is probably the feature of his life that most people remember, yet it is a strange joy, an exuberance that is not diminished by suffering; a consolation that makes possible the great personal sacrifices that he accepts in order to grasp ultimate meaning for his life.

Luke’s Gospel reminds us of the need to pray. Chapter 11 is devoted to his teaching his disciples how to pray. The perfect master that he is, he also models what he teaches. Saint Luke records nine prayers of Jesus. Saint Francis wished to devote his life to prayer. It was on the advice of others that he balanced prayer with acts of charity and public preaching. Life without prayer would have been insufferable for him: It was his daily nourishment and joy, the “portion” that Mary had taken at the feet of Jesus. (From this he named the mother church of the Order, “Little Portion,” La Portiuncula.) By prayer, he entered into intimate conversation with God. His identity became so fused with that of Jesus that his prayer would be crowned with the wounds of Jesus, the Stigmata.

Luke’s Gospel expands our awareness of God’s forgiveness of sins. Saint Francis must be understood as a penitent, part of a major movement dating back to the 3rd century which took on anti-ecclesiastical aspects around the time of Saint Francis’ life. The lengths to which God had gone to communicate his love and life fill Saint Francis with unfathomable awe. This helps to explain the fervour of his conversion and the intensity of his prophetic life.

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

– Luke 1:76-77

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The Gospel of Luke is a letter. It is addressed to Theophilus, lover of God. My reflections in 2011 will also

be in the form of letters to Friends of Saint Francis on the basis of meditation in Assisi the year in which the Catholic lectionary centred on Luke's account of the life of Jesus. Letters from Assisi: A Franciscan Journey is a collection of thoughts on the Gospel of Saint Luke that are shaped by landmarks in the religious story of Saint Francis and informed by my own faith journey. These will be released in monthly instalments throughout the year. I dare to share them because they may resonate with the reader's own spiritual narrative.

These reflections are based on a trip in October 2010, and another years earlier, to the places associated with the spirit of Saint Francis. They are the fruit of much fascination with the passion of Saint Francis as well as with the most "Franciscan" gospel. The combination proved powerful as I allowed the waters of both to converge on the estuary of my own life.

Geography matters. Surroundings shape character: the forests and towns; the hills and valleys. Climate and geology affect the DNA. People and politics all serve to mould a person into a type of receptacle that God can then fill with his holy breath, if we let him. I had to touch, smell, hear, taste and see the goodness of the Lord as Saint Francis had, inasmuch as history would allow, visited many places between Rome and Venice, covering almost 1,500 kilometres, to mark the passage of a mysterious man who gave his life to learning how different God's ways are from our ways.

I covered a lot of the ground that Saint Francis covered, save for his trips to the Holy Land and Egypt. Throughout, I asked myself what drove him to take the radical steps that he did to imitate Christ. I also wondering what, if anything, this had to do with me. What I came to realize is that he saw Christ's ways as those of peace and joy. And that no earthly strategy could suffice in bringing about a world of peace and a life of joy. Only God's ways are the ways of meaning and happiness.

The chance discovery of a small Franciscan convent at Fontecolombo, halfway to Assisi from Rome, on the steep hills overlooking the gorgeous Rieti Valley, was for me the most surprising experience. Fontecolombo is the place most often frequented by Saint Francis in the last years of his life. There was no one around. Only the birds could be heard.

I was moved to tears in the grotto that contains only a cross made of two sticks, leaning against a recess in the steep limestone cliff. I felt strongly the prayerful presence of the poverello. I wondered, what instigated his radical conversion? I think it was an intuition that true joy is only to be found in the life of Christ, in God's ways.

What makes places like this special? They are enduring reminders that God's way is the way of freedom, communion and love. Indeed, what is most appealing about the life of Saint Francis is the fact that we all crave freedom from fear; we seek communion, rather than the stress of fragmentation and alienation; and want love that is patient and kind.

*I come here curious where Francis sighed
And villagers sang the birth of our Saviour.
A healing memory.*

– Excerpt from my poem *Reborn in Rieti*, 2010

4 | THE SPIRIT OF ASSISI

JANUARY 2011

In January, many nations celebrate the visit of three magi from the East to the place of Jesus' birth, based on an account by the evangelist Saint Matthew. Arguably, we should also recall the visit of other characters in the birth narrative, the visit of the lowly shepherds, as told by Saint Luke. Both were epiphanies—concrete encounters between divinity and humanity.

In those days, according to writer Richard Rohr, shepherds were believed to be “people outside the system and outside the law,” boorish and dirty sinners in the eyes of the Jews. Given his purpose, “to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,” it is fitting that Jesus would reveal himself first to them.

Luke's includes the fullest infancy narrative of all four Gospels. It reveals Luke's focus on individuals, and his special interest in social outcasts, poverty and wealth: “Those who are poor and humble are often the objects of the Saviour's mercy...At Nazareth, Jesus proclaims good tidings to the poor...the first beatitude is addressed to the poor, without qualification ‘in spirit’ as found in Matthew, although the same sense may be intended.” (Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*)

This prophetic and salvific message about good news for the poor, originated by Isaiah, is amplified by the chorus that accompany the angel: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours.” (Luke 2: 14) True peace has come in the person of Jesus (cf. John 14: 27), defying all expectations about what force would be needed to defeat the Roman occupation.

The shepherds ran to see what the angel had announced: “So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.” (Luke 2: 16) Their eagerness echoes that of Mary: “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” (Luke 1: 39) The coming of the Lord was perceived spontaneously by chosen ones as good news, the long awaited news of salvation.

One can only imagine the amazement in the eyes of the shepherds, and they saw peace and joy that were diminished neither by the filth and destitution of the setting, nor by the cold and darkness of the night, nor by the repeated rejection of the surrounding community. Their hearts reposed on the gift that healed their deepest longing.

No doubt propelled by their joyful hope, “the shepherds returned, glorying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” by the angel. (Luke 2: 20) An experience this profound would mark the depth of their being and transform their lives forever. The intensity of God's love expressed in the Incarnation would seize their hearts and focus their minds on spreading the good news.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away.

– Luke 1: 52-53

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Greccio is at once mundane and mystical. My first sight of it was on a chilled and overcast October weekday. The streets and square were vacant, which added to the mystery of this depopulating hill town, centuries old. Salmon and beige buildings, two to four stories high, stood as ghostly figures against mountains that rose from this plateau overhanging the Velino River that winds through the broad Rieti valley. Only the oak forest atop Mount Sabini basked in sunlight.

Climbing a set of stairs that ran beside the church's belfry that is the only remnant of an 11th century castle, I looked around for a sight of the Franciscan convent that we had travelled to see. Nothing. Eventually, someone appeared and gave instructions that led a short distance on the outskirts.

The shrine of the Crib blends well with the white stone of this sub-range of the Apennines, topped by trees to camouflage it further from unsuspecting tourists. Upon entering the modest, pale yellow building that greets pilgrims, I encountered the Chapel of the Crèche, built the year Saint Francis was canonized, 1228, two years after his death. The cave harbours a 14th century fresco titled *The Nursing Lady*, portraying the Nativity in Bethlehem, and Christmas in Greccio. It is a silent morning. All is calm. All is bright.

This place, intensely peaceful, turns out to be living museum, intact as though the 13th century friars had only just retired to their cells for private prayer. Through narrow corridors, I arrive at the living quarters of Saint Francis, the refectory with the remains of a small basin, the old dormitory. On the second floor runs an ancient wooden corridor along which are tiny cells, no doubt occupied by Saint Bonaventure and Saint Bernardine, heroes of my fascination with the Franciscan tradition.

From there runs a choir room with its ancient lectern and an antiphonal written on parchment. I am dazed. Softly, I walk into the first church dedicated to Saint Francis. Its simplicity is breathtaking: dark stalls, a 14th century retable, and a fresco that recalls the forgiveness of sins: "Now a temple of the Lord has been consecrated on the site of the crèche and above the crèche itself an altar built and a church dedicated in honour of the most blessed Francis" (Celano, *Life of Saint Francis*)

There simplicity was honoured, poverty was exalted, humility was commended, and Greccio was made, as it were, a new Bethlehem.

– Thomas of Celano, *Life of Saint Francis*

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Greccio was a special place for Saint Francis; it was indeed a New Bethlehem. According to Keith Warner, "He loved poverty not for its own sake, but rather because in it he saw Jesus, and in Jesus, the incomparable generosity of God's love...his devotion to the incarnation of Christ was the foundation upon which Franciscan spirituality rests, and it explains the significance of his devotion to Jesus in the crib at Greccio and his stigmatization on Mount La Verna."

Epiphanies, which the Webster dictionary defines as "a manifestation, especially of a divine being; a sudden perception of the essential nature or meaning of something," are vital forms of divine self-revelation and communication. They exist for a reason. Arguably, without them, faith would have no foundation.

Such epiphanies occur at the end of a journey, which begins with an insight that Scripture portrays often

as the appearance by an angel. In the case of the shepherds, we read that “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’”

The Webster definition is interesting. It suggests both that the Incarnation is an act of self-revelation, a manifestation. It also alludes to Christ as the essence or meaning of God, which of course is what is also meant by the word Logos that is translated into English as “Word.” The Word became flesh and lived among us. (John 1:14)

For Saint Francis, epiphanies occur throughout his journey of religious conversion—during his imprisonment and subsequent illness, in his awakening from knightly fantasies, among lepers, at the run-down church of San Damiano, to name a few. Greccio is the culmination. (La Verna would be the crowning.) We see not only in his Canticle of Creation but across the litany of intuitions and insights that he favours authentic experience as the path to God. His use of bodily senses is remarkable. The Incarnation is a celebration of God’s accessibility to humanity.

Warner continues, “Devotion to the Incarnation of Christ in the Franciscan tradition is expressed in a radical affirmation of the goodness of the human person, and we believe that to be human is good because Jesus was a human being. The Incarnation of Christ was so important that it fundamentally changed the nature of the relationship between God and humanity.”

Manifestly, Saint Francis deepened Christianity’s celebration of Christmas. His genius was to add to the mundane (popular awareness of a historical event; common materials assembled with theatrical flair) a vision of divine love. With the former, he creates excitement with broad popular appeal. With the latter, he draws us all into a world beyond human reason, with an emotional response to divine reality that is hidden within the physical evidence present: “The saint of God stood before the manger, uttering sighs, overcome with love, and filled with a wonderful happiness.” (Celano)

To understand the connection between Francis’ understanding of poverty and the Incarnation...he encompasses humility, simplicity, vulnerability, non-possession, and most importantly, self-emptying generosity.

– Keith Warner, *Franciscan Spirituality*

FEBRUARY 2011

From the beginning, Saint Luke presents Jesus as ordained to a sacred mission of deliverance. Jesus is clearly seen as the Saviour of all humanity. The first chapter is filled with prophecies, angelic proclamations and joyful responses. Zechariah declares to his son John the Baptist that his cousin Jesus will “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (1:79) The second chapter delivers on this promise. Jesus is born “a light for revelation to the Gentile and for glory to your people Israel.” (2:32)

This is all consecrated by the presentation of Jesus in the Temple. (Cf. 2:22-38) According to the Ancient Law, “Every first-born male shall be designated as holy to the Lord,” although the allusion confuses the presentation of the first-born son, who by tradition belongs to the Lord because of the destruction of the Egyptian first-born at the Passover, (Ex 13:15) and the ceremony of ritual purification of the mother forty days after giving birth. (Lev.12:1-8)

The infant’s reception confirms that Jesus is no ordinary first-born: He is the long-awaited child that would come “for the redemption of Jerusalem.” Jesus, only weeks old, was received by two persons who represent the link between Judaism and Christianity: Simeon, “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel,” and Anna who “never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.”

What is remarkable about this account for me is that so early in the life of this joyously welcomed infant, there is a sobering note about what his mission would entail. Simeon sighed in gratitude at the sight of the child: “Now you are dismissing your servant in peace,” revealing that he had long awaited this day in hope. He turned to Mary and warned that Jesus “will be opposed...and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Still, it is the joy of God entering our world that I chose to retain. The road of life is strewn with obstacles. Some would focus all of their attention on this; that is the path of darkness. To welcome Jesus into our life is to be guided by “a light for the revelation to the Gentiles.” Living is a choice, renewed daily in hope. Simeon lived in the hope “that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” When he did, he was filled with true joy.

In some ways, the presentation of Jesus as a baby runs parallel to his baptism thirty years later. This time, it is his heavenly father who says, “You are my Son, the Beloved with you I am well pleased.” (3:22) This is a breakthrough moment for Jesus. He grows in wisdom and grace because he is assured of being loved unconditionally. This love would overflow from him, enabling a mission that could not be diminished by death.

Immersed in the river of repentance, despite his innocence; blessed by the Holy Spirit of Truth, Jesus was proclaimed the son of God, after rising from the Jordan as he would three years later from the grave. His life would enter a new phase, a very public ministry of salvation for the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. The passage from Isaiah to which he referred when speaking in the synagogue soon after, began that day as people heard the voice from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the “Beloved.” Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.

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Piazza del Vescovado joins the three-story eggshell and rose coloured stone Palazzo de Cardinale, at the corner of Via Sant'Agnese, to Santa Maria Maggiore, which had been the cathedral of Assisi until 1036 when San Ruffino began to house the cathedra. I enter its three austere pilaster sections silently, respecting the prayer of a handful of tourists, observing fragments of 14th century frescoes. The apse is simply beautiful—unadorned, concave—rising high to a dark timber ceiling.

Descending limestone stairs, I gaze upon the vestiges of a paleochristian structure standing on the foundation of the so-called House of Propertius, with its Pompeian style wall paintings. Human history insists on continuity. So does spiritual history. This is the temple to which Saint Francis was presented as a child.

This church would witness the turning point from which his public ministry would be inaugurated. To the right of the well facing its eight-ray rose window, he stripped off his expensive clothes and returned these to his angry father, renouncing publicly his inheritance.

Dramatic as it was, this storied stripping was not a freakish act. At least the bishop would have understood the significance of this gesture, recalling Jesus being stripped of his garments before the crucifixion. Saint Francis was dying to his former life in order to clothe himself with Christ (cf. Gal.3:27). In the words of Saint Bonaventure, “Thus the servant of the Most High King was left naked so that he might follow his naked crucified Lord, whom he loved... He designed for himself a tunic that bore a likeness to the cross, that by means of it he might beat off all temptations of the devil; he designed a very rough tunic so that by it he might crucify the flesh with all its vices and sins.”

The vision of a penitent raises in our age the spectre of suffering. We think of painful self-mortification, forlorn faces and desolate deprivation. It is hard to exaggerate the joy that filled a heart in which freedom now reigned: Free at last. Free to be a child of Love. Free from falsehood and fear. Free from privilege that must be rationalized, power that must be defended and possessions that never suffice. Free from obsessions that never satisfy. Free of an oppressive father to hear the Creator gently call, “You are my Son, the Beloved with you I am well pleased.”

The walled city echoed with the sound of spiritual song: French verses, vernacular praise, and the celebration of meaning, identity and purpose. Houses, convents, public buildings, blending into a single, warm monochrome architecture rising on either side of discreet cobblestone alleyways and stairs, retransmit these to our contemporary senses. Its narrow lanes rise and descend under his light-hearted steps—undulating as the formerly forested hills would have. Brilliant cascading geraniums drape window boxes, cling to ledges and insinuate themselves into the countless crevices between sand-colour bricks. They testify to the child-like joy of the eternal poverello.

(His mother) brought him to the cathedral of San Rufino....the water flowed down his forehead, and he was called Giovanna...Giovanni had announced the coming of the Messiah and preached repentance as the way to salvation.

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Saint Clare too was “presented at the temple”—first for baptism and then for entry into religious life. While the former is significant; the later represents what she would call a conversion, matching that of Saint Francis roughly six year earlier.

The baptismal font at the Cathedral of Saint Rufino, where Saint Clare was baptised, still survives, along with the crypt and outer walls of the eight-century church. I stood amazed at the low wrought-iron rail, gazing at this well-preserved vestige of holiness. I admire the enclosure: an alcove with wood-relief cameos of brothers also baptised there over which stretches the curved image of the saint as a baby held with arms outstretched—as Jesus might have been by his mother—by Otolana Offreduccio, a devout woman, standing beside her husband, Lord Favarone, a great knight who had traveled to the Holy Land on Crusade. The image of this family of privilege is topped by a large gold and azure striped shell, a symbol of the water of baptism.

But her conversion from life in the world to her consecration at the Portiuncola is probably an even more apt parallel to the presentation of Jesus at the Temple. Today, the tiny chapel that has been from the beginning the mother church of the Franciscan order sits dwarfed by the huge baroque dome of Santa Maria degli Angeli. The original basilica was destroyed by an earthquake in the mid-1800s. But the sacred Romanesque chapel of white and mauve squared stone and decorated roof slabs survived.

On its facade, wrapped around the main entrance, appears a painting of Saint Francis receiving from the Christ and Mary his Mother the indulgence, Pardon of Assisi. But I prefer the back entrance. Over the bulging doorway, there is a beautiful, albeit somewhat damaged fresco painted by Pietro Perugino around 1485. Crucifixion depicts Jesus being taken down from the cross at which Saint Francis kneels, arms outstretched. I have twice visited this revered site that was given to the growing order by the Benedictines after the early brotherhood outgrew their first friary, in what had been stables, at Rivortorto, only two kilometres east of Assisi.

According to Marco Bartoli, Saint Clare, then a young lady, walked alone—leaving behind her house, her city and her family, to join the brothers at the Portiuncola. It was on Palm Sunday, the day that catechumens were baptised, that she was greeted in joy by the brothers with lit torches, as Jesus might have been when gloriously entering Jerusalem. Then, she would reverently recall the Way of the Cross recounted in the Gospel reading as Saint Francis cut her hair with all liturgical correctness, save for the absence of a bishop who would customarily conduct the tonsure ritual.

The most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart, that I should do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis.

– Saint Clare of Assisi, *The Testament*

MARCH 2011

According to the logic of Saint Luke's Gospel, Jesus did not enter the desert in order to be tempted; he "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." (4: 1-2) We may ask, then, why did the Holy Spirit lead him there in the knowledge that he would be tempted? The answer may lie in what occurs just before and immediately after this familiar event.

At the end of the third chapter, we read about the baptism of Jesus at which he hears a voice from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (v. 22) Later, returning from the desert, "filled with the power of the Spirit...he began to teach in the synagogues and was praised by everyone." (4: 14-15) This experience of temptation, therefore, comes at a crucial moment in his life, at the inauguration of his ministry.

Note the displacement. Jesus is on a journey, within and without. Indeed, the journey within is the most interesting. Moreover, his journey is ours. It is the movement of liberation from superficial identities to the identification and appropriation of our unique life's mission. It is a pilgrimage that requires wisdom and courage because it inevitably passes through a dark valley of testing from what is comfortable but inauthentic to an unknown horizon.

With time, after wrestling with the false self, the meaning of our life clarifies. In chapter four, Jesus "unrolled the scrolls and found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." (v. 17-18) Then he declared boldly, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (v. 21)

Sometimes the way we are tested is determined by the very nature of our calling (Cf. Monbourquette, *How to Discover your Personal Mission*) Jesus, the very Word of God, was tempted by a false understanding of scriptural authority. It is ironic—but it should not be surprising—how deceitful agents can hide snares within the maze of holy texts that are the foundation of human fulfillment.

Temptation comes from our woundedness. Between us and the realization of our mission run a chasm of self-doubt and a forest of sub-personalities that confuse us and complicate our discernment. These exist because they serve a limited purpose. They allow us to function despite fears and insecurities. They are generally adapted to particular circumstances. But they limit our freedom and authenticity.

Most of us flee from the pain of childhood wounds rather than confront them. In the process, we flee our true identity and giftedness for these are inexorably tied to our deepest wounds. What Jesus did was teach us to face the truth of our identity regardless of the discomfort that this might entail. Freedom and spiritual growth are always accompanied by temptations. If we fall prey to these temptations, we are effectively distracted from knowing the mission and purpose for our life—the mission that gives meaning to our life.

But why lead Jesus to the desert? It is precisely there that testing is likely and even necessary. Desert is code for solitude with no place to hide. No distractions. No one to reinforce falseness or encourage us to take the easy, pleasure-seeking-pain-avoiding way.

In other words, God's Wisdom directed him to a time and place where he could appropriate his spiritual

identity and to reflect upon God's call and the mission that flowed from his particular charisms. In the process, he would have encountered lingering biases, fears and doubts. He could become who he truly is. The power of this story lies in its application to our own lives. Can we truly afford to dispense with solitude, as frightening a time and place as that may be?

Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.

– Henry David Thoreau

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The Apennine mountain range is the backbone of the Italian peninsula. The Umbrian-Marchigian Apennines are composed chiefly of limestone and sandstone, and contain numerous grottoes, craters, and springs. The lower parts of the slopes have thickets of evergreen shrubs and at higher elevations there are deciduous forests of beech, oak, and hornbeam, as well as coniferous forests and meadows.

Saint Francis was often led by the Spirit into the wilderness. He would wander the wooded hills and discover the many crevices and caves that scar the soft rock. Eventually, modest hermitages would be erected. Here, he would spend days, even weeks, in solitude. I have already noted grottoes in the Rieti valley and will refer later to others in the vicinity of Mount La Verna. Now, my mind is focused on the hermitage known as Eremo delle Carceri, so named because this was originally the prison of Mount Subasio. Saint Francis came here to pray in the many surrounding caves.

The climb to Eremo di San Francesco winds along up the gentle slope. It is lined with Cypress trees between which grander views emerge as the elevation rises. Squared stones form shoulder-high walls that lead to the hermitage; signs urge silence in this *zona sacra*: *Ubi Deus ibi pax*. White, pink, orange and red geraniums line the guardrail and decorate the ancient iron crested well that sits just inside the main gate. A clay-potted plant suspends from an old pulley and chain above another well nearby, this one just outside the door to the santuario.

Once inside, I bend low to pass through the small stone doorframe of the poverello's grotto. I recall the words of Jesus: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10: 25) A small peace plant sits amid the cramped stone surroundings; smallness, peace, life in the womb of Mother Earth—it all fits.

I see the first temptation, the one about turning stones into bread, as basically an invitation to doubt his vocation to sonship. This is what we all doubt. "If you are the son of God..."

– Richard Rohr, *The Good News According to Luke*

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Why did Saint Francis, who is generally understood to have been a gregarious extravert, devote so much of his time to solitude after his conversion? Part of the answer lies in his desire to pray and commune with God whose unfathomable love moved him so deeply. Another part, I think, lies in a need to deal with his own demons: doubts and fears, personality issues and ambivalence in the face of contradictory forces in

play in his immediate surroundings. Carl Jung wrote, “Solitude is for me a fount of healing which makes my life worth living.” In solitude Saint Francis would find the wisdom to make sound choices and the courage to remain faithful to his commitments by resolving the dissonance in his life.

Hermitages always played an important part in Franciscan life. According to Thomas Merton, who clearly had an affinity for its spirituality, we find in the primitive rule of the order “the authentic tradition of the earlier itinerant hermit movement, which was non-monastic and completely open to the world of the poor and the outcast.” (“Franciscan Eremitism” in *The Francis Book*).

Solitude was a place of healing, not only because it provided an environment in which he could reflect and make decisions authentically, but because there he enjoyed a panoramic view of the world in which he was called to love and serve the Lord. Merton wrote that Franciscan eremitism was “open to the world and oriented to the apostolic life...A spirit of simplicity and charity pervades even the life of solitary contemplation.”

Let the brothers wherever they may be in hermitages or other places take heed not to make any place their own and maintain it against anybody else. And let whoever may approach them, whether friend or foe or thief or robber, be received kindly.

– Saint Francis of Assisi, *First Rule*

APRIL 2011

One of the most poignant moments in the life of Jesus, as recounted by Saint Luke, is his vigil on the Mount of Olives after his Last Supper with his twelve closest friends. He prayed alone in anticipation of the cruellest death imaginable. The evangelist tells us that “in his anguish he prayed more earnestly and his sweat became like drops of blood falling down on the ground.”

There are many gripping aspects to this scene but I also find remarkable his earlier admonition to his disciples. He warns them to “pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” What did he mean by that?

The answer can be found by returning three years earlier when Jesus was tempted in the desert. This was a pivotal moment in his life and ministry. At the conclusion of this clever confrontation, the devil “departed from him until an opportune moment.” At Gethsemane, that moment had arrived. The temptation to avoid agony would not only test his fidelity to the Father, but to his identity and mission as well.

Jesus would consider the temptation, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me,” but respond to it by reaffirming the meaning and purpose of his life: “Yet, not my will but yours be done.” In asking others to pray that they not be tempted, Jesus must have known that, faced with this cup, they would not have the strength to resist.

When we think of the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, and the doubt of Thomas, we can be quick to judge and even hasty to dismiss them as cowards. Would we have been any different? Indeed, would Jesus have had the strength to stay the course had he not developed over time an unwavering solidarity with the Father’s redemptive plan, which I do not so much view as the result of his submission to torture and murder, but the fruit of his unflinching commitment to truth and love—even onto death, death on a cross?

Contemplate the ineffable charity that led Him to suffer on the wood of the Cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death...let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervour of charity.

– Saint Clare of Assisi, *Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague*

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From a distance, La Verna looks bare. It rises very gradually at first and then suddenly shoots sharply skyward to a table set for hungry souls. A feast waits: The sanctuary turns our attention inward, satiating the deepest desires of the human heart. By contrast, its outer walls reveal the splendour of the Tiber and the Arno valleys, leading the eye into infinity and the imagination into eternity.

The place where Saint Francis received the wounds of the crucified Christ near the end of his life is commonly called Mount La Verna, although it is actually Mount Penna; La Verna is the name of the forest. La Verna is an imposing rock on which stands a sprawling yet plain-looking monastery—3,700 feet above sea level—that was built in stages, beginning in the early 13th century. The entire mountain was given to Saint Francis in 1213 by the Count of Chiusi of nearby Casentino, as an expression of gratitude for a conversation that the Count regarded as illuminating and redemptive.

He could not have offered Saint Francis a more fitting gift. Still today, it is, in the words of his benefactor, “Very solitary and wild and is extremely well adapted to anyone who wants to do penance in a place remote from people, or wants to lead a solitary life.” The entrance to the sanctuary is lined on the right by almost white, sheer-faced, weather-worn stone, topped by a range of tall, naked beech trees that stretches eerily against the October skyline. On the left, a leafy hill falls steeply to the valley below. A statue of Saint Francis, gently urging a boy to release doves destined for market, gives form to a presence that is palpable.

The 16th-century well and guest house sit in the paved “Quadrante,” a piazzale named for the clock-face that adorns a stone wall. More than a dozen chapels and oratories seem randomly located, testifying to the organic growth of this oasis sought by mystics and contemplatives, including Francis, Bonaventure, Anthony of Padua and Peter of Alcantara.

Perhaps the most striking one is the 13th-century Chiesa St. Mary of the Angels. At the far end of the exquisite azure and white glazed terracotta altarpiece depicting the Assumption of Mary by Andrea della Robbia (1435-1528), whose work is handsomely displayed throughout the nearby Basilica. On the floor facing it is a discreet marker: Here is the precise place where the poverello stood or knelt when his conformity to the life of Christ was crowned by five sacred wounds to his hands, feet and side. Along both walls, arched by an expanse of plain eggshell plaster, run walnut choir stalls.

As beautiful as this mountain is, what makes it holy is the presence of God drawn into intimacy with a simple man who placed relationship with God above all other delights. What one senses here is both the presence of Saint Francis who prayed with both sorrow and joy but also that of the seraphic angel who etched onto his body *the evidence of unfathomable love*.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.

– Psalm 24: 3-4b

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Twelve centuries later, Saint Francis would recall the words of Jesus: “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” He would retreat to solitary places, as Jesus had done, to pray in order to renew his commitment, deepen his relationship with God, and clarify his mission. In the process, he would confront his demons, repent, and resolve to continuously purify his body, heart and desire in order to conform his life to that of Christ.

Now he calls to us to do the same so that we can face temptation with grace. Temptation can take many forms. Three important ones come to mind in relation to the lives of Jesus, of Saint Francis, and of our own life: (1) those that distract us from our spiritual identity; (2) those that deter us from our mission; and (3) those that undermine the theological virtues of faith, hope and love.

According to the traditional teaching of the church, we are all inclined to sin, which is not to deny that we are also hard-wired for union with God. This inclination is tightly woven into our nature, not by design but as a result of inherent weakness, whether in the form of “evil” inherited from the first man (Adam: original sin), or in the form of insecurity inflicted by the bruises of life, especially the very earliest stages (in uterus

through early childhood.)

Recently, we considered the temptations that Jesus faced in the desert as including a challenge to his self-understanding, especially his status as the beloved son of God the Father. Saint Francis, too, dealt with huge existential questions about his identity, particularly as he distinguished his own from that of his father, a rich worldly merchant. For us, the challenge is even greater. Few among us have a clear sense of our unique “name.” (Cf. Isaiah 43:1) We are always subject to doubt, always vulnerable to the discouragement or false counsel of others. There is always room for the evil one to nudge us off course.

Now secure in his identity, the temptation at Gethsemane would attack the mission of Jesus. Bone-crushing fear can drive anyone to abandon any mission. Jesus would have to draw on his sense of self, his experience of the Father’s fidelity, and his embrace of higher values to set aside personal satisfaction and even the natural instinct of self-preservation. Saint Francis must have spent countless hours doubting his call. In the beginning it conflicted with his dreams of knighthood and his inclination for pleasure. Later, it would bring an agony in his heart as he saw his vision unravel. Could this truly be God’s will?

We don’t have reliable evidence of temptation insofar as faith, hope and love in the lives of Jesus and Saint Francis, but we have plenty in our own. Doubt coexists with faith, undermines hope and impoverishes love. No matter how hard we pray, we will never eradicate it entirely. As long as we have a mind to reason, as long as we experience disappointments, and as long as insecurity lingers in our heart, doubt will shake the very foundations of faith, hope and love.

Ultimately, the greatest temptation is to overly trust our own wit and ingenuity and, by rationalization, to render unimportant or irrelevant the wisdom that took centuries to consolidate. Why bother to discern our identity when uniqueness is smothered by mass marketing? Why harbour hope if science can control the destructive forces of the universe? Why have love for another if I can cocoon myself and satisfy my own needs.

I think the big temptation of our culture is trivialization.

– Timothy Radcliffe

MAY 2011

May is often called in Catholic devotional literature the “month of Mary.” Luke’s gospel contains the most frequently cited passage in reference to our Blessed Mother, known as the Magnificat (1:46-55.) This hymn, sometimes recited, is her response to her cousin Elizabeth’s greeting (“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”) It glorifies God, thanking him for choosing her to bear his Son. The canticle is often incorporated in evening prayer.

Its tone is admirable, reflecting humility and gratitude for herself and for all of humanity: “The Mighty One has done great things for me ... he has filled the hungry with good things.” It is a bold obedience, despite evident risks, to the declaration of God’s angel Gabriel: “The Lord is with you ... you will conceive and carry in your womb a son.” Mary, a virgin, is perplexed. Gabriel provides details. He reassures her, “Be not afraid.” Mary answers with wisdom and courage beyond her age, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary is an example to each of us, invited as we are to be in relationship with Jesus, to carry in our hearts the Word of God, to “ponder what sort of greeting this might be.” In meditation, her faith, hope and love sustain our fragile virtue and encourage us to enter into a period of gestation with a view to delivering the Word to those that Jesus served and healed while on earth: “the lowly,” those who are oppressed, imprisoned, naked and hungry in any way.

During an off-season visit to Lourdes, I discovered another aspect of Mary from a book that I read on the way, and from meditations that I was able to enter into as I spent three separate periods alone in the grotto where she appeared to a 14-year-old Basque peasant, Bernadette Soubirous. The grotto itself is a symbol of interiority, of the cavity in each human heart, of shadow and light. As she stood in one of its niches, I imagine that, in some ways, Bernadette reminded Mary of herself at the time of the Annunciation and Visitation, almost two millennia earlier. Once again, she would deliver Jesus to a world much in need of his truth and love.

Simply put, Mary is the icon of original innocence. Without engaging here the question of original sin underlying the negative predispositions of the human spirit, or the particular woundedness that affects each of us, I believe that there lies at the core of our being a unique word of God that gives us life, and that it remains virginal despite the scarring of our physical, emotional and spiritual lives. Mary’s “immaculate” conception reminds us of that hopeful reality.

It is what the sick come to find, through their infirmities, often even beyond their suffering, to touch the immaculate, that point of infancy, of truth where everything is reborn, everything blossoms, where there is nothing left but life in its original burst. (My translation)

– Philippe Mac Leod, *D'eau et de lumière : Lourdes, une spiritualité de la transparence*

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Santa Maria degli Angeli, dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels, the poor little church just down the hill from the medieval walled city of Assisi, is the mother church of the Franciscan Order. Today, it stands within the municipality.

The tiny frescoed structure, now dwarfed by the magnificent basilica that shrouds it, was given to the early brotherhood after it outgrew its first home at Rivertorto. Yet, the simplicity and prayerfulness that were the foundation stones upon which Saint Francis built a movement of literal obedience to the life and sayings of Christ, as reported in the Gospel, transcend the majesty of these newer surroundings.

This church was given around 1208 to Saint Francis by the Benedictines of Monte Subasio. It was in bad condition, laying abandoned in an oak forest. He died, in his cell, not fifteen yards from the church, at sunset on Saturday, 3 October 1226.

La Porziuncola, as he called it (Little Portion) is now decorated by artists from different periods. On the façade, above the entrance, is a fresco depicting Saint Francis receiving from Christ and the Virgin the indulgence, known as the “Pardon of Assisi.” At the back, above the entrance, is a fresco of the crucifixion that was damaged during the construction of the basilica. The 15th century door is decorated with floral motifs. On top of La Porziuncola stands a small gothic belfry.

The interior is austere and simple. Some of the rough, squared stones, taken from Mount Subasio, were put in place by the saint himself while repairing this little church. It is decorated in a simple Gothic style with frescoes from the 14th and the 15th century. But the masterpiece is the six-part fresco in the apse: The Annunciation; Saint Francis throwing himself into the thorny brambles; Saint Francis accompanied by two angels; the apparition of the Christ and the Virgin, accompanied by 60 angels, with Saint Francis offering roses; Saint Francis imploring pope Honorius III for confirmation of the indulgence; and Saint Francis promulgating the indulgence, accompanied by the bishops of Umbria.

I sat quietly on one of the seats along the wall. Gradually I squinted as I did as a child when I wanted my surroundings to disappear. In my imagination, I would see the hand of the poverello on the stones that he set to repair the crumbling walls; I heard the first brothers raise their joyful voices in celebration of the psalms.

I sat in a pew along its grey outer wall, allowing my imagination to picture the woods and the thousands that gathered in 1217 at the Chapter of the Mats, so called because those that came from a distance made shelters with straw mats. I imagined them discerning the mission for their exploding numbers, including their missionary apostolate.

I was moved at the sight of the modest Cappella del Transito, which was built over the infirmary in which Saint Francis praised God with his last breath. I always marvelled at his fearless embrace of death, as he had embraced a leper at the beginning of his religious conversion: “Praised be you, my Lord, through our sister bodily death.” The poverty and confident joy of his new life is summarised here.

He loved this spot more than any other in the world. It was here he began his religious life in a very small way; it is here he came to a happy end. When he was dying, he commended this spot above all others to the friars, because it was most dear to the Blessed Virgin.

– Saint Bonaventure, *Life of Saint Francis*

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Because Saint Francis chose La Porziuncola to be the cradle of the Franciscan Order, it can be said also that it stands at the heart of the spirituality that bears his name. If this is so, then a special attachment to the mother of Jesus is at the heart as well. The link is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that it is Mary who gave us Jesus as brother. He prayed before each hour of the Breviary, “Holy Virgin Mary, there is none like unto you born in the world among women, daughter and handmaid of the most high King, the heavenly Father! Mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ, spouse of the Holy Spirit, pray for us with Saint Michael the Archangel and all the virtues of heaven and all the saints , to your most holy, beloved Son, our Lord and Master. Amen.”

The brotherhood of Jesus is a rich and central image in the tapestry of God’s love. It is the result of important insights regarding creation and humanity; the nature of God and the nature of people created in his image; of inherent dignity of being a child of God, a child so loved as to be given a perfect spiritual mother, a devoted woman conceived full of grace.

Our Holy Mother is also remembered for a key sentence uttered quietly in the public event that inaugurated the public ministry of Jesus. The simple words that she addressed to the wedding servants at Cana echo into the ears of anyone who professes to be a follower of Christ: “Do whatever he tells you.” On faith alone, obedience transformed water into wine.

For Saint Francis, the Blessed Mother was the protector of the order. She would watch over it just as she had watched over the newborn child Jesus, and as she had stood by him when as an adult he hung dying from a cross. His attachment to the human and divine aspects of the mysteries of Incarnation and Redemption are known to us. Less familiar is the attention paid by him to Mary in these scenes.

To Francis, Portiuncula was a royal castle, like that other one at Bethlehem, for poverty was the badge of the noble children of God. He said, “Poverty is a royal virtue, because it shone so brightly in the King and Queen.”
(Celano)

– Leonard Foley & Jovian Weigel, *The Third Order Vocation*

JUNE 2011

There is in the Gospel of Saint Luke a clear call to preach the Good News. We know that the incarnation of that vocation takes many forms. In fact, for the most part, it consists of living in a way that gives witness to the Good News. Saint Francis is reported by some to have said, “Preach always; if necessary use words.” Even if he never uttered these precise words, they clearly reflect his sentiment, judging from what he has written. Actions speak louder than words; they are more believable and inspirational.

Some people have an explicit role to play in the propagation of the faith through the written and spoken word. Saint Luke tells us that Jesus sent out the twelve apostles “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal... They went through the villages, bringing good news and curing diseases everywhere.” (9: 2, 6) He also instructed them to do so without hindrance: “Take nothing for your journey.” (9: 3) He gave the same advice to “seventy others.” (10: 1-4) To them, he gave a particular message: “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’”

Good news, God’s kingdom, peace: these are the core of the Christian message to be proclaimed boldly and confidently; hopefully and lovingly; respectfully and thoughtfully. The Gospel is good news but it is more than just pleasant news; it is a key—sometimes difficult to apply—to the hidden meaning of life, which leads ultimately to true and spiritual joy. It is the lens through which we can see and understand, against all worldly misconceptions, the truth about love.

The kingdom of God is precisely that: a state of truth and love. Peace is the proof of truth and love. God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus, who is truth and love, so we might be rescued from the tyranny of self-centred fantasies.

Preaching the good news, by word or deed, is the responsibility of each follower of Christ. By one expression or other, our purpose is to be the good news to one another and, in so doing, play our part in constructing a kingdom of truth and love; authenticity and peace. This will be achieved first by evangelising the shadows in our selves and living the gospel, and then by witnessing to the joy that comes from that conversion. Walter Burghardt, an authority on the art and craft of preaching, wrote, “(Preaching) should proceed from conversion, express conversion, promote conversion.”

At some level, conversion calls for the purification of the heart; a turning to God that is free and focused. It is necessarily a turning away from what distracts, delays or obstructs our spiritual development. That is why Jesus instructed his disciples to shed accessories, to travel light. (It is interesting to note that the list of proscribed items is longer for the apostles in chapter nine than it is for the disciples in chapter ten.) Purity of heart, not perfection in rhetoric or even life, is the key to effective preaching—by word and deed.

The heart must be empty of all other things; because God will possess the heart alone; and as he cannot possess it alone without emptying it of all besides, so neither can he act there, and do in it what he pleases, unless it be left vacant to him.

– Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

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Padua, a short distance west of Venice, greets pilgrims from all over the world with purity, peace and a grandeur that contains their endless petitions. Some are idle tourists, others curious Christians, but notable among us are those whose hope rests in the miraculous reputation of Saint Anthony, public preacher and Franciscan teacher, who died here in 1231. They have come, sometimes desperate, for healing of heart and soul, if not for curing of their ailing bodies.

The city is very picturesque, with its dense network of arcaded streets opening into large communal *piazza*, and many bridges crossing the various branches of the Bacchiglione River, which once surrounded the ancient walls like a moat. At its centre stand a remarkable basilica dedicated to Saint Anthony, a vital destination for pilgrims for centuries.

The present edifice, constructed on the site of the saint's original friary, has grown under a variety of different architectural influences. Externally, the brick facade has a Romanesque central section, which was extended outwards when the aisles were built, acquiring four deep Gothic recesses and an elegant arcaded balcony that stretches across the broad front of the building. The numerous domes, like the domes of St. Mark's basilica in Venice, give a Byzantine appearance to the building. The many small belfries recall Turkish minarets.

I join visitors who pray fervently, my head and hand placed on the back of the grey wall of the saint's tomb before moving to the chapel of the reliquaries. There are dozens of ornate containers holding the habit and cord of the saint, chalices and missals used during his lifetime. I gaze with a mixture of amazement and reverence upon his lower teeth, tongue and vocal chords, all symbols of his gift of angelic preaching.

The basilica contains several important masterpieces, including those that represent the Virgin Mary: the *Madonna Mora*, dating from 1396; the *Madonna del Pilastro*, a mid-14th century fresco; and, in the high altar area, the bronze Madonna with Child and six statues of saints by Donatello, who also executed four reliefs with episodes of the life of *il santo*—all this to honour a man who shunned wealth and fame his whole life.

I ask that if you find anything edifying, anything consoling, anything well presented, that you give all praise, all glory and all honour to the Blessed Son of God Jesus Christ. If on the other hand, you find anything that is ill composed, uninteresting or not too well explained, you impute and attribute it to my weakness, blindness, and lack of skill.

– Saint Anthony of Padua, *Epilogue*

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Saint Anthony of Padua is the first in a long line of eloquent Franciscan preachers. Certainly Saint Francis before him had been an effective communicator in his own way, but his style was less sophisticated. As Saint Anthony had been trained as a theologian by the Augustinians, his style was an innovative blend of influences, drawing on the schools of Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh St. Victor. As varied as these were, the content of his sermons was clearly Franciscan, challenging prevalent mores founded on lust, avarice and doctrinal heresies. He spoke sweetly of the love of God and the gift of Jesus.

Purity of heart was the hallmark of his preaching. Saint Anthony made extensive use of the Gospels in his homilies. In one, there are at least 183 passages from Scripture. He understood these clearly as well as the circumstances of people to whom he preached. His thoughts, motives, desires, dispositions, emotions, decisions and actions were all focused on one thing only, God's love. He spoke with grace. Indeed, he displayed, in the words that Blessed John Henri Newman used to describe the pure in heart, "the uncontaminated heart, open countenance, and untroubled eyes of those who neither suspect, nor conceal, nor shun, nor are jealous."

His intimate use of Scripture in preaching was such that he brought Jesus to life in the hearts of his listeners. This is illustrated by the popular statue of the saint holding a bible on which stands the child Jesus. The point of this image is that Saint Anthony reveals Jesus to the world in the way he preached the word of God. That is the ultimate goal of evangelisation: to show the heart of Jesus. Burghardt said it well in a book entitled *Sir, We Would Like to See Jesus*.

The spirit of *il santo* whose preaching was widely admired still resonates within the high walls of this unique sanctuary. Here, I bought the first volume of his sermons for Sundays and festivals. In the prologue, Saint Anthony explains his method. Each Sunday commentary begins with the Gospel of the day and is then explained allegorically, morally and "anagogically," meaning that it also refers to the life of the world to come. Notwithstanding their complexity, the homilies of Saint Anthony are marked by simple language and inspiring tone rather than the polished and studied rhetoric that was esteemed in his day. They were noticed for their quiet beauty and persuasive effect.

To each heart, his gentle words whisper still those of Jesus, "Peace be to this house."

In 1228 Saint Anthony was asked to Rome to preach to the papal curia and the throngs of pilgrims. People from various ethnic backgrounds were in attendance...and they each heard (his) sermon in their own language.

– Lucinda Vardey, *Traveling with the Saints in Italy*

JULY 2011

The triumph of the Resurrection, in my humble opinion, is the account in the Gospel of Saint Luke concerning Jesus' conversation with two grieving disciples on the way to Emmaus. As a person who is often called upon to accompany the bereaved, I have a particular affinity for this story.

Saint Luke shows Jesus simply walking along with them, probably taking his cue from their stride. He asks them about what is burdening their hearts. They reply that this happened, and besides, this other thing happened; moreover, that happened. This is who he was to us, what happened to him, what hopes were dashed. Awful as these things were, people are telling us things that confuse us further. It all comes out.

Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interprets to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they come near the village to which they were going, he walks ahead as if he were going on. But they urge him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." Then their eyes are opened, and they recognize him. Then he vanishes from their sight. They say to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Later they tell others what had happened on the road, and what Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. The message is clear: "Open your hearts and minds to new possibilities, different ways of being in relationship with one another, with the one who has left and different ways of looking upon the journey."

The Gospel of Saint Luke was of particular interest to the Franciscan theologian Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, doctor of the church.

Through the eye of the flesh, the human could see things outside in creation, with the eye of reason, the things within, with the eye of contemplation, the things above.

– Saint Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*

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Bagnoregio, meaning royal bath, is a quiet country town in Latium, close to Viterbo and Orvieto. King Desiderous gave it this name because the waters of its hot springs cured his wounds some time before the Lombards were defeated by the Franks in 774.

At the centre of this rural town, on a quiet weekday, I enter the cathedral of St. Nicholas. There are the usual volunteers preparing the church for an upcoming liturgy. The presence of Saint Bonaventure's memory is faint here. No particular attention is paid to the few artefacts. I am nonetheless awestruck by the relic of the entire right arm, encased in a silver reliquary, with which he wrote important works of Christian theology and spirituality.

The cathedral, which recalls the architecture of St. Peter's in Rome from the interior, was constructed on the ruins of a church said to date back to the fifth century. Its green marbled walls and arches, and brilliantly coloured windows also harbour a parchment bible that is believed to have belonged to the saint. The grotto

where Saint Bonaventure prayed lies at the end of a garden.

La casa natale di S. Bonaventura rests in the nearby *Civita di Bagnoregio*. The Etruscan hamlet juts on its own rock high above the surrounding olive-groved valley through which the Chiaro and Turbido streams run lazily. It has been abandoned since an earthquake in 1695 seriously damaged its now all but forgotten houses and palaces.

Within the Franciscan Order, Bonaventure is considered its second founder and the chief architect of its spirituality

– Ewert Cousins, Introduction to *Bonaventure* (The Classics of Western Spirituality)

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Saint Bonaventure's commentary on the Gospel of Luke is a three-volume opus that interprets each verse of the Lucan Gospel. His understanding of scripture is informed by scripture, which means that he takes a comprehensive and integrated view of the entire body of sacred writing. His own texts are filled with bible verses, as a result.

During the period that immediately followed his sudden death in 1274, Saint Bonaventure was recognized as a leading figure in the development of Christian thought. As his views differed in some respects from those of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican teacher eclipsed his Franciscan counterpart, in part, to distinguish between Catholic and Protestant views. Saint Bonaventure, aligned with the philosophies of Plato, Saint Augustine and Blaise Pascal, was more acceptable to Protestants than Saint Thomas Aquinas who was significantly influenced by the more-recently rediscovered philosophy of Aristotle. Etienne Gilson persuasively argues that this is because Saint Bonaventure's writing is often compartmentalized and misunderstood: "The totality of the system means so much that the mere notion of fragments has no meaning at all." (*The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*) He adds:

"St. Bonaventure's doctrine marks the culminating point of Christian mysticism and constitutes the most complete synthesis it has even achieved. Thus it must be clear that it can never be properly comparable in any point with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas... The philosophy of St. Thomas and the philosophy of St. Bonaventure are complementary, as the two most comprehensive interpretations of the universe as seen by Christians, and it is because they are complementary that they never either conflict or coincide."

In recent years, considerable scholarship has begun to restore Bonaventurian theology to its rightful place in the Christian faith's pantheon of development. Contemporary authors such Zachary Hayes, Ewert Cousins and Ilia Delio, have mined his writing to uncover aspects that address contemporary concerns about the nature of God, creation and humanity's place in it.

Near the end of his life, Saint Bonaventure summarized his entire outlook in a lecture given at the University of Paris entitled *Six Days of Creation*, "This is our entire metaphysics, emanation, exemplarity, and consummation, that is, illumination through spiritual radiations and return to the Most High."

Every good thing emanates from the Father as a powerful life-giving river—creating cosmic beauty, order, harmony, meaning and vision. The idea would be Platonic were it not for distinctly Christian qualities as

the free expression of a self-communicating Love. As Delio writes, “God simply desires to create because God is love, and perfect love can never be self-contained but must be shared freely with another.”

All creation reflects God in various degrees of resemblance. Christ expresses the Father’s love in a language that is comprehensible to creation. Humanity strives to imitate the Word as its deepest desire and highest achievement. “The journey to God is really a journey in love deepened by knowledge of God that, in Bonaventure’s thought, finds its deepest meaning in the imitation of Christ,” writes Delio.

Creation ultimately returns to the Father as its fulfillment and consummation. “The human person is God-oriented and cannot find rest anywhere except in God,” writes Delia. This is perhaps best expressed in the *Canticle of Creation* in which Saint Francis relates all created things back to the Lord. “Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Wind...through Sister Water...through Brother Fire...through our Sister Mother Earth.”

Bonaventure writes that creation is like a river which flows from a spring...the spring is the creative and dynamic Trinity.

– Ilia Delio, *Simple Bonaventure: An Introduction to His Life, Thought, and Writings*

AUGUST 2011

The Gospel of Luke contains numerous references to the dangers of inordinate attachment to wealth. He quotes Jesus as counselling his disciples to travel without being encumbered by possessions. He admonishes them to eschew privilege and to deal wisely with power. He reveals, including in their more insidious forms, vices related to anxiety and selfishness.

In the parable to the rich fool, he warns, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.” (12: 15) He adds, “Be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly.” (21: 34)

In fact, this is the foundation for Chapter 10, verse 6 in the rule of Saint Clare of Assisi, “I admonish and exhort the sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ to beware of all pride, vainglory, envy, avarice, care and anxiety about this world, distraction and murmuring, dissension and division.” Her strict observance of the counsel that the Lucan gospel provides is an important reason why her memory is one of sanctity radiating across the ages.

Some people that we put on a pedestal and call saints came by a circuitous route in order to attain that status. They were worldly before being struck by grace. Others walked a fairly straight road, intent from an early age to conform their lives to spiritual values. Saint Clare of Assisi seems to fit into the latter category.

Saint Claire was so named because it was assumed that somehow this child would illuminate the shadows of the world. Her anxious mother prayed fervently while the child was still in her womb, and received this insight: “Fear not for you will safely give birth to a light which will shine on all the earth.”

Saint Francis would often preach in her presence in Assisi. He knew of her holiness even in those early days. On Passion Sunday, 1212, at the church of St. Mary of the Portiuncula, mother church of the fledgling fraternity, she begged Saint Francis to receive her in the community of hermits. He agreed but immediately entrusted her to the care of Benedictine Sisters in the nearby monastery of *San Paolo delle Abbadesse*.

She was soon transferred to *Sant’Angelo* in Panzo where a small group of women were living in a manner that better suited her spirituality of penance. But this would not last long. She desired something more closely aligned with the poverty that Saint Francis advocated, without privilege—a form of living unheard of for the women of that time.

The move to the modest chapel of San Damiano was decisive. She would never leave this place which was so dear to Saint Francis. Along with a small group of sisters, she would live in utter simplicity in a style that was substantively Franciscan, even as it differed in appearance from the life of the friars.

The Poor Ladies, as they were known initially, would live in an enclosure that was meaningful. Like the walls surrounding medieval cities, this one would provide physical but also spiritual security. It was a sign of fidelity and devotion to a heavenly spouse. It was also the locus of a spiritual family that would grow in virtue as the sisters worked through the challenges of daily living in a confined space of sanctity.

The origins and scale of San Damiano convey a great deal about the spirituality of the early sisterhood.

Never conceived as a monastery, it was in fact a rural chapel made of stone—restored by stone by Saint Francis himself—modest in proportion, as were the primitive oratories at Rivortorto and the Portiuncola. According to Marco Bartoli, it would have been surrounded by wood and straw buildings similar to the “hovels and huts of the Assisi peasants and country folk.” Although stone structures of bare necessity would be erected, such as a dormitory, an infirmary, and a small refectory, San Damiano would “always have an unfinished air.”

The community of San Damiano was an eremitical community right from the start, composed of women who followed to the letter the Gospel precept to ‘seek first the kingdom of God and his justice.’ They sought to live their life of prayer in isolation and separation from the world.

– Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*

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The tiny church dedicated to Saints Cosmos and Damien that became the home of Saint Clare for all of her adult life is a short distance downhill from Assisi’s ancient southern wall. This was the second time in recent years that I walked down the cypress-lined, cobblestone steps to this quiet oasis. Surrounded by silver-grey olive groves, the little rustic church is surprisingly simple, even for a Franciscan site. Its facade of small stones and pebbles features a modest, unornamented rose window, intersected in its lower part by a three-arched portico.

I advance reverently into the church, drawn by the felt presence of those who understood what the world would either ridicule as foolishness or dismiss as mystery—the joy of spiritual poverty. The furnishings of the austere interiors seem original. Everything appears to stand undisturbed since the death of the poverello’s dear spiritual friend in 1253.

I descend to the Crucifix chapel that Saint Francis restored. The Byzantine cross against which Jesus seems to stand, almost resurrected, accompanied by angels and saints, is a replica. The original now hangs in Saint Clare’s Basilica that was built after her canonization. A small window and grille separates the chapel from the choir. The saint and her sisters seem only out for a moment as I enter the paneled choir with its rough, age-stained backboard and kneeling benches. The vaulted ceiling is whitewashed, as are the windowless walls. But nothing symbolizes poverty as much as the primitive lectern. The cobblestone floor must have cooled the sisters during scorching summer days.

In the silence, I can imagine psalms sung in peace and joy as I walk, sometimes alone, through Saint Clare’s private garden and oratory, the dormitory where she died, the cloister and refectory. I feel the peace of hearts united with Jesus, and the joy of a project so filled with meaning.

The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters that Blessed Francis established is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity.

– Chapter One, (Rule) *Form of Life of the Poor Sisters*

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Saint Clare's legacy is impressive. Although she left few writings (a rule, a testament, a blessing and five letters), it is noteworthy that she was the first to have a new rule of life for a community of women approved by the pope. The degree of emphasis that she placed on the "privilege" of poverty was unique.

She also stands out as a pillar of faith, hope and love. She spent more than 40 years in the tiny convent of San Dimiano and endured many hardships. Her confidence in the vision of Saint Francis must have been a source of strength for him. He certainly found incredible joy in his first female follower, especially as she lived in the very place where he had initially heard the call to "repair" the church of Christ. Saint Clare was a significant part of that project, standing up as she did to those who would have undermined it.

Among the symbols that are prominent in her writings are mirrors that reflect the virtuous aspirations of the human heart, and the narrow door which recalls that the path to holiness that requires discipline, wisdom and humility is not a wide, worldly boulevard.

Like Saint Francis, Saint Clare was a mystic. This is especially evident from her theology of the mystical marriage which was the subject of her letters to her friend, Blessed Agnes of Prague, daughter of the king of Bohemia. Just as Saint Francis had wanted to become a knight to a very particular Lord, namely Christ, Saint Clare understood the call to be the bride of Christ as the most fulfilling of vocations. These were elaborate images, rich in analogy and meaning.

Her compassion for Christ in his suffering, her deep desire for union with her beloved and her maternal care for her sisters brought this image to life. Mystical marriage made sense of silence to be intimate with a lover only present in Spirit; humility in the presence of holiness; poverty that imitated the vulnerability of the Crucified lover; and love that is faithful to the grace of God who is Love.

O spouse of Christ, because, since you have totally abandoned the vanities of this world, like the other most holy virgin, Saint Agnes, you have been marvellously espoused to the spotless Lamb, Who takes away the sins of the world.

– Saint Clare, *Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague*

5 | CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

JANUARY 2012

This month, we begin a series of reflections on prayer. Each month, we will explore what it meant for Saint Francis of Assisi as well as what potential it holds for us today.

The spiritual life, especially Franciscan, is a perennial tug-of-war between contemplative prayer and apostolic activity. One need only recall the struggle that Saint Francis had with his own vocation. After a period of discernment, he concluded, “It seems to be more pleasing to God for me to interrupt my retirement and go out for such work.” (St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Major*)

We may profit from comparing this conclusion to the life that Jesus proposes in what I think is the most Franciscan of all chapters in the Bible, Luke 10. The chapter opens with the commissioning of disciples to go ahead of him and deliver across the countryside a message of peace. In the closing narrative, Jesus settles a familiar dispute between Martha and Mary by judging that Mary, who “sat at the Lord’s feet and listening to what he was saying,” (v.39) had chosen “the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (v.42)

Jesus admonished Martha not because she was working but because her approach to hospitality, which is a very worthy pursuit, caused her to be “distracted by her many tasks.” (v.40) Her concern was not to be in relationship with Jesus, or Mary for that matter, but to perform a set of tasks according to her own standards. She lost sight of the purpose of her work.

Saint Francis understood from the start that the expression of love for God in service must not “extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion.” (*The Later Rule*, chapter V) In fact, his decision to give himself to the service of his neighbour, especially by preaching about God’s love and the need for a conversion of mind and heart, was expressed significantly as mere pauses in prayer: “...to interrupt my retirement.”

Above all, Saint Francis understood that action must be constantly connected to God through prayer—that he was called to serve as Martha while being mindful like Mary of the heart of the love that service expresses. His inspiration came from the life of Jesus who was active in preaching and healing but never ceased to pray. Luke’s Gospel gives us many accounts of Jesus retreating from crowds in order to pray (e.g. 3: 21-22; 4: 1-13; 4: 42; 5:16; 6:12).

In fact, Celano reminds us that Saint Francis “often chose solitary places to focus his heart entirely on God...For his safest haven was prayer; not prayer of a fleeting moment, empty and proud, but prayer that was prolonged, full of devotion, peaceful in humility.” (First *Life of St. Francis*)

He found several places in the Italian countryside to which he would retreat for private prayer between the major public events of his life, following the example of Jesus. Many are marked by monasteries today. The prayerful spirit of the poverello is palpable when they are visited in a quiet, unhurried way. But it would be a mistake to think of Francis praying only in solitude. He also advocated praying the Divine Office with the community of brothers and attended with prayerful reverence the Sacrament of Eucharist.

Dacian Bluma OFM writes authoritatively about the Franciscan life of prayer in *The Cord* (1963, 13). He points to the set of rules that Saint Francis prescribed for his brothers, drawing special attention to the rule for living in hermitages: “It has a distinctive Franciscan trait even in his hermitical way of life, namely, fraternity. Three to four constitute a community. They live together, conscious of their dependence upon

each other and helped by it.”

Bluma suggests that there was from the start “something very practical in the way this provision for the contemplative life in the Order evolved in Francis’s own life.” The pragmatism with which contemplation was practiced echoed the very concrete inspiration for prayer, namely the historical events of the life of Jesus, especially in the birth and passion of Christ. Hermitages at Greccio and La Verna are emblematic of that fact. They serve too to remind us that Jesus is our inspiration for praying.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

– Mark 1: 35

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The spiritual act of praying may be understood from a variety of perspectives. In its strictest sense, prayer is a petition or request. (*The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 1993) In the Old Testament, prayer is typically praise (e.g. exultation to the Lord), intercession (e.g. prayer for the life of the king) or supplication (e.g. plea for peace.) In the New Testament, the Greek words that are used connote a wish, a vow or a request.

Regardless of its content, what most strikingly characterizes prayer is its personal appeal. It addresses God in the second person and is spoken in the first. God is addressed concretely, as in a conversation about something that is happening in my life, a fear or a desire. The hope is always to forge a personal relationship, a union or communion.

The other remarkable thing about prayer is that it is perceived to be a response to something that God has already done or said, whether perceived negatively or positively. It is as though God were “standing at the door, knocking.” (Revelation 3: 20) It is instructive to note, especially in the Old Testament, the honesty with which the response is expressed or withheld.

Saint Francis astutely turned to the example of Jesus to understand the purpose and nature of prayer. We profit from doing the same. As indicated above, Luke’s Gospel in particular portrays Jesus as prayerful, not as a matter of duty, but as though it was as vital as breathing. He draws not only strength and wisdom from it; it defines his very identity. Being the Son the God, the Messiah of God, he had to be intimately and continuously connected with the Father. His life’s purpose was not some self-styled mission but the work that his Father had sent him to accomplish.

One of his most revealing acts was his sermon on the bread of life, after which he spent the night in prayer. (Mark 6: 46; Matthew 14: 22-23; John 6: 15) Also, he prayed praise and gratitude to his Father when the disciples “returned with joy” after Jesus had sent them to preach the Gospel: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.” (Luke 10: 21)

Jesus prayed for children (Matthew 19: 13-15; Mark 10: 13-16); on his last day in the Temple as his hour was approaching (John 12: 27-28); before the Last Supper (Luke 22: 31-32); during the Last Supper (John 17: 1-26). He also prayed during his ordeal at Gethsemane and as he hung upon the cross. (Luke 23: 34; Mark 15: 34; Matthew 27: 46; Luke 24: 46)

Jesus instructed his disciples to pray and taught us a particular way of praying—proposing that we address our shared Father in a distinctive structure of praise, commitment to God’s kingdom, doing his will, and petitions for our basic physical and spiritual needs. (Luke 11) Saint Francis so loved this prayer that he often made what we now call The Lord’s Prayer the subject of his meditation. On one occasion, he wrote a paraphrase of it that reveals the depth of his devotion.

From this model, we deduce that while there are many forms of prayer, some more formal than others, there are two main purposes: the first is praise and thanksgiving; the second is petition and intercession. The first, a fitting place to start, looks back on what God has already done in our life; the second looks forward to what we want God to do for us. The danger, of course, is to have ourselves become the centre of prayer rather than God. Nonetheless, it is right and proper that we express our deepest fears and hopes to “Our Father” whose many promises point to concern for our well-being.

As for style, it is good to use a variety but also to recognize which is most efficacious for us, a situation that may change as we grow in prayer. The range of possibilities includes mental and vocal prayer; discursive and affective prayer; mediation and contemplation; kataphatic prayer (affirmative, using words and images) and apophatic prayer (negative, evacuating words and images); centering prayer; mystical prayer; and private and communal prayer. (Cf. J. Wright in *The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*)

Brother Leo...preached to the brothers to be eager to have and imitate pure and holy simplicity, holy prayer, and lady Poverty, on which the holy and first brother had built.

– (Ubertino Da Casale, *The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*)

FEBRUARY 2012

True Christian prayer is necessarily Trinitarian. We do not pray to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit in isolation; we pray with, through, and to them in relationship to one another and to us. Blessed John Paul described the Trinitarian dynamic of prayer as reciprocity and mutual self-giving: “Wrought in the Holy Spirit, this reciprocity opens us, through Christ and in Christ, to contemplation of the Father’s face.”

Yet this dynamic does not end with the Father. Rather, the Father returns us to the Son whose Holy Spirit of Truth and Love permeates all of creation and continues to reveal a reality that transcends purely human understanding. We experience even fleeting moments of cosmic consciousness only by entering the mystery of the Trinity.

“Prayer, especially Trinitarian prayer or prayer in the Spirit, is indispensable for growing in holiness,” writes Capuchin Franciscan Friar Raniero Cantalamessa. (*Contemplating the Trinity*, 2007) I would add that Trinitarian prayer is also key to growing in happiness because joy comes from meaning; and the only meaning that satisfies human desire is truth that exceeds the reach of reason alone. The grasp of meaning requires a mystical acceptance of reality that is not sensible, literally.

What we learn, too, from the Trinity about holiness and meaning is that ultimate reality is not static, although we try to shoe-horn God into rigid categories that are inevitably inadequate if not altogether wrong. In fact, the Trinity is the most dynamic force in the universe. It is vital in every way.

A good example of this creative energy is the interplay between God and creation. This is well articulated by the 14th Century mystic John Ruusbroec (*The Spiritual Espousals*): “God is a flowing and ebbing sea which ceaselessly flows out into all his beloved according to their needs and merits and which flows back with all those upon whom he has bestowed his gifts in heaven and on earth.” This suggests that only people who are not rigidly moored can move freely with the tides of human endeavour that are filled with God and divinity. That is the essence of the challenge “Duc in altum, put out into the deep.” Fr. Cantalamessa explains, “...lift the anchors! Do not be afraid of venturing forth into the open sea of holiness.”

Prayer is indispensable for this adventure in faith. Indeed, prayer calls for action but action must always be firmly rooted in prayer. More particularly, the journey that is described here requires us to grow in our capacity for contemplative prayer, which is awareness of the presence of God apprehended not by thought but by love. (*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 1993) There must be a desire for communion with God; even if that desire is placed in the human heart by God’s Holy Spirit and fuelled by intuition that pierces through limited evidence that the mind alone would misconstrue. Prayer allows us to enter with new vision the mysteries of our faith, especially the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus and to experience these as Trinitarian events of comic significance.

The resurrection of Christ is...the act of infinite tenderness by which the Father, after the terrible suffering of the passion, revived his Son from death by means of the Holy Spirit and made him Lord.

– Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa

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I have heard people claim that Saint Francis was principally charismatic, arguing that what mattered most to him was openness to new and sudden developments that were not of his own design. I have also heard it said that his attention was mostly fixed on the humanity of Jesus. Indeed, imitation of Christ's life was for Saint Francis a privileged path to holiness. Yet others have argued that his relations were directly with the Father. He left the secular world by declaring, "From now on I can freely say *Our Father who art in heaven.*" And, it was the unfathomable, awe-inspiring, and overpowering love of God—creator-father of all that is good—that moved him to radical conversion and the Gospel life.

All of these statements are true, but they are also inadequate. Saint Francis was, above all, Trinitarian. This is the shared understanding of those who have explored the depth of the poverello's spirituality. Those who interpret evidence superficially—presumably because he was uneducated and favoured simplicity—misjudge and underestimate him.

To illustrate this point, let's take the example of his storied association with the crib and cross of our Saviour. At La Verna, the place where he received the wounds of Christ—the Stigmata—there is a lovely terra cotta relief glazed in white, with blue and green accents. It depicts the Nativity with the crowned Father and traditional Dove along with a host of angels hovering over the silent scene. Meanwhile, the very depiction of the crucifixion that seized the attention of Saint Francis at San Damiano and began the exciting journey that we call Franciscanism features all three Persons of the Trinity. This time, it is only the outstretched hand of the Father that is seen along with the Dove.

The Trinitarian quality of Saint Francis' spirituality is perhaps best exemplified by his letter to the entire order and by his very brief instruction to Saint Clare regarding the rule of life of the first community of sisters. The conclusion to his letter to all Friars Minor reads, "Most High, Who live and rule in perfect Trinity and simple Unity, and are glorified, God all-powerful, forever and ever. Amen." To Saint Clare and the Poor Ladies of Assisi, he wrote, "Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most High King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel," in other words, according to the example and teaching of the Son, "I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have that same loving care and special solicitude for you as I have for them."

Saint Bonaventure, who aptly theologized the spiritual intuitions of Saint Francis, refers to the contemplation of the Trinity as self-diffuse Good. By this principle, we understand creation to be an overflow and expression of immense and continuous fecundity. What the Father had created is summarized in the Son, thus he is the link, intermediary, and exemplar for humanity that seeks, often unconsciously, the restoration of communion with its creator.

The magnitude of things...clearly manifests the immensity of the power, wisdom and goodness of the triune God, who is by his power, presence and essence exists uncircumscribed in all things.

– Saint Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*

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The saint's devotion to our Blessed Mother is well known. It is inexorably tied to his devotion to the Holy Trinity. This is well expressed in his Greeting to the Virgin Mary: "Holy Lady, Queen and Mother of God,

you are the virgin who has become the Church: chosen by the most holy Father in heaven, consecrated by him as a temple with his beloved Son and Consoler-Spirit; in you was and resides the fullness of grace, the One who is all goodness.”

There is an image in my mind of Saint Francis expressing his reverence to our Blessed Mother in relation to God Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Our Lady of the Trinity* is a quiet retreat centre that I have visited twice in Blois, at the heart of France’s lovely Loire Valley. It is animated by a community of Capuchin Franciscans. The main sculpture of the sanctuary features Our Lady with three rings intertwined on her chest as representation of three privileges accorded by the triune God, namely power, wisdom, and love.

The artist’s presentation of her relationship to her Son as being inseparable from that of the Father and the Holy Spirit is insightful. It ties together threads that must never be looked upon in isolation. She did the will of the Father by conceiving the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is well summarized by Saint Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians by the final and familiar blessing, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (13: 13)

The Marian privileges of power, wisdom, and love led to the devotion of the Three Hail Marys, first proposed by Saint Anthony of Padua and ratified by Pope Benedict XV on July 20, 1921. The practice of this devotion is actively promoted by the community of Our Lady of the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

– Luke 1: 35

MARCH 2012

The Franciscan Crown is not something that sits on the head. It is a very human mantra that rises from the heart like incense to a realm beyond time and space. It is a ladder that leads, bead by bead, to the contemplation of a reality that eludes the mundane mind.

The Franciscan Crown is in fact a rosary—also known as the seraphic rosary—that consists of seven decades, rather than the usual five. It recalls the special joys of the Virgin Mary: the annunciation, the visitation, the birth of our Lord, the adoration of the magi, finding Jesus in the temple, the resurrection of our Lord, and the assumption of our Blessed Mother and her coronation in heaven.

According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, the Franciscan Crown dates back to 1422. Evidently, a young novice who had that year been received into the Franciscan Order had, previous to his reception, been accustomed to adorn a statue of the Blessed Virgin with a wreath of fresh and beautiful flowers as a mark of his piety and devotion. The Blessed Virgin instructed him how, by reciting daily a rosary of seven decades in honour of her seven joys, he might weave a crown that would be more pleasing to her than the material wreath of flowers.

In 1905 Pope Pius X, in response to the petition of the Procurator General of the Friars Minor, enriched the Franciscan Crown with several indulgences.

One should not be surprised that the Franciscan tradition so uniquely celebrates the joys of Mary's life. Too often, the tradition is cast in austere tones. While it is true that the cross is held high, it is even truer that the Resurrection is raised as the balm that would soothe the sting of death. So it is with the life of the mother of our Saviour. The joys would outshine her agonies. Each joy would crown a gracious achievement.

The Annunciation reminds us of the blessings that are rooted in faithfulness to something more valuable than personal satisfaction. Saying yes to God for Mary was saying no to fear and the limits of our own desires. Hearing and heeding the call of God to assume a particular responsibility, regardless of risk, revealed to her the fullness of her being and the consolation that would offset every piercing of the heart.

The Visitation reminds me of the gift of fraternal living. The support that two people give to each other in doing God's work is of incalculable value. It brings joy to the heart to share ordinary experiences in order that they may bear extraordinary fruit. This sacred event also reminds us that what we do is only part of a plan. Mary and Elizabeth would carry in their womb holy persons who would share in the mission of salvation.

The birth of our Lord is a glorious event of immense significance in Franciscan spirituality. Saint Francis was deeply moved by the knowledge that God so loved the world that he would send his only Son into the cold night of our humanity. The creation of a Nativity scene at Greccio in 1223 would attest to his impassioned devotion to the Incarnation that, while still a mystery, was a very concrete reality for the saint.

The Nativity would echo the gift of joy to all of humanity represented by two very different groups. First, the shepherds came from nearby fields; they were simple and poor people. But the adoration of the Magi reminds that God loves even those who would come by a different way. The metaphor is striking.

Saint Francis urged his brothers to espouse radical poverty, humility and simplicity. As a result, some falsely assume that he was anti-intellectual. I prefer to think of him as Jesus conversing with learned people, on his own terms, speaking insightfully without pretence. But Jesus' encounter would result in the anguish of his parents who did not know where he was. They rejoiced in finding him in the temple just as Saint Francis rejoiced in finding Jesus at San Damiano. Learning turned out to be far less important than relationship.

The resurrection of our Lord is the summit of our faith's journey. Saint Francis never lost sight of this, even as he focused so much reverence on the birth and death of Jesus.

The assumption of our Blessed Mother and her coronation in heaven is the zenith of joy for the man who added to our understanding of Christianity the human dimension of salvation. In using ordinary people to bring us to the Light, God is glorified as are the persons who collaborate authentically in this spiritual endeavour.

The *Salutation to the Blessed Virgin Mary* that was written by Saint Francis provides a glimpse into his joy in the heavenly coronation of the one who would make the Lord our brother. He begins, "Hail, O Lady, holy Queen, Mary, holy Mother of God: You are the virgin made church." His regard for her virtue and privilege is remarkable. As comment Regis Armstrong and Ignatius Brady in their publication of *The Complete Works of Francis and Clare*, Saint Francis "clearly perceives and presents the Virgin Mary as the model for every Christian who responds to the virtuous presence of God in his life."

Mary leads us to discover the secret of Christian joy, reminding us that Christianity is, first and foremost, evangelization, "good news", which has as its heart and its whole content the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the one Savior of the world.

– Blessed John Paul II

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Some people will tell you that the rosary must be prayed with full awareness of each word in each prayer. I am not of that opinion. I believe that the rosary releases its fragrance once we have allowed it to lift us beyond the precise words, repeatedly recited, into a deeper awareness of their meaning.

The power of the tradition is its capacity to connect us with the Father, whose presence we praise, whose kingdom we hunger for, whose will unlocks the best of who we were created to be in this life and in the next. It is a complete communion in which we can unselfishly ask for what we need to carry out his mission every day in the fullest love that includes forgiveness and protection from evil.

The rosary incites us to enter into a visceral understanding of ourselves as filled with grace by our Father who is above but also inside us in Spirit and Truth, and that our work done in the name of Christ is blessed. Through the rosary, we are consoled by the knowledge that all the saints pray for us who are weak and often misguided so that we can accept the challenges of each day with confidence and on the last day we will see clearly what we only now see dimly.

In effect, the rosary is a contemplative prayer. It enables the eyes of the heart to gaze into mysteries not otherwise intelligible. For instance, it allows us to marvel at divine grace as it envelops creation, to

contemplate the face of Christ through the eyes of Mary, to observe Jesus in all the phases of his earthly life and to see him gloriously enthroned at the right hand of the Father.

As well, the rosary is a prayer of gratefulness. It has the potential of carrying those who pray it beyond mere thanksgiving to transform the heart into the beauty it contemplates. Brother David Steindl adds, “Rosary prayer, in its outward form, is really the repetition of a Christian mantra. This connects those who pray the rosary with all their sisters and brothers in other traditions who also use mantra prayer. In fact, other traditions often use strings of beads. The Christian rosary itself may be patterned after Moslem prayer beads which crusaders brought back from the Middle East.”

With the beloved mother looking for her beloved Son, do not cease searching until you have found him.

– Saint Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*

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In addition to developing the Marian devotion known as the Franciscan Crown, the Franciscans are credited with adding the final words, the intercessory part, to the Hail Mary: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” The first words of the prayer, of course, are taken from the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel, as recalled in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel.

As the glorious Virgin of virgins carries Christ materially in her body, you too, by following in his footsteps, especially those of poverty and humility, can, without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your body.

– Saint Clare of Assisi, *The Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague*

APRIL 2012

Contemplative prayer is rooted in humility, without which it lacks sufficient openness to wonder and grace. Humility is the foundation of prayer and serves to establish a right relationship with God, with others and with the universe that sings the praises of God, often in the most discreet ways. Only when we acknowledge that “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” (Romans 8: 26) are we ready to receive the gift of prayer from God’s Holy Spirit.

The Catholic Catechism reminds us that the gift of contemplative prayer “can be accepted only in humility and poverty.” (2713) Humility begins from the premise that all goodness, each wondrous thing and our very capacity to experience wonder comes from God. There is an intensity of contemplative prayer that is perceptible only to the eyes of a pure heart and is always grounded in joy and love.

Humility bears witness to the truth, just as Jesus, who was born, lived and died in humility, testified to the truth at his trial. (John 18: 37) On the other hand, pride is blindness. It sees only what false desire covets. Fear is blindness because it denies everything that lies beyond walls of false security. The universe that was created in love by God and that we admire with child-like hearts is far vaster than the illusions that are created by falsehood and fear. It gives voice to God’s goodness and invites us to enter the mystery of a Trinitarian dynamic that is unimaginably creative and healing.

I see that by humility (and) the virtue of faith...you have taken hold of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and the hearts of men with which you have purchased that field of him by whom all things have been made from nothing.

– Saint Clare of Assisi, *The Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague*

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Humility is both an attitude and an insight. It rests on the knowledge that each person possesses inherent dignity because he or she was lovingly created in God’s image and purposed to a mission with a set of particular gifts. Included in that awareness is an understanding that human life is marked by limitations and fragility.

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. She became aware of the nature of this fragility and focused her work on authenticity and vulnerability. She concluded that frank awareness of this vulnerability is the key to authenticity and honesty in relationships. This principle applies equally to human interactions and to contemplative prayer.

A little more than a year ago, she gave a talk in which she laid out her thesis: “We live in a vulnerable world. And one of the ways we deal with it is we numb vulnerability. And I think there’s evidence—and it’s not the only reason this evidence exists, but I think it’s a huge cause—we are the most in debt, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history.

“The problem is that you cannot selectively numb emotion. You can’t say, here’s the bad stuff. Here’s vulnerability, here’s grief, here’s shame, here’s fear, here’s disappointment. I don’t want to feel these. You can’t numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively

numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning, and then we feel vulnerable, so then we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. And it becomes this dangerous cycle.

“One of the things that I think we need to think about is why and how we numb. And it doesn’t just have to be addiction. The other thing we do is we make everything that’s uncertain certain. Religion has gone from a belief in faith and mystery to certainty. The more afraid we are, the more vulnerable we are, the more afraid we are. This is what politics looks like today. There’s no discourse anymore. There’s no conversation. There’s just blame. You know how blame is described in the research? A way to discharge pain and discomfort.

“We perfect but it doesn’t work. And we perfect, most dangerously, our children. Let me tell you what we think about children. They’re hardwired for struggle when they get here. And when you hold those perfect little babies in your hand, our job is not to say, ‘Look at her, she’s perfect. My job is just to keep her perfect—make sure she makes the tennis team by fifth grade and Yale by seventh grade.’ That’s not our job. Our job is to look and say, ‘You know what? You’re imperfect, and you’re wired for struggle, but you are worthy of love and belonging.’ That’s our job. Show me a generation of kids raised like that, and we’ll end the problems I think that we see today.

“We pretend that what we do doesn’t have an effect on people. We do that in our personal lives. This is what I have found: to let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen; to love with our whole hearts, even though there’s no guarantee—and that’s really hard, and I can tell you as a parent, that’s excruciatingly difficult—to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we’re wondering, ‘Can I love you this much? Can I believe in this passionately? Can I be this fierce about this?’ just to be able to stop and, instead of catastrophizing what might happen, to say, ‘I’m just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I’m alive.’

“And the last, which I think is probably the most important, is to believe that we’re enough. Because when we work from a place, I believe, that says, ‘I’m enough,’ then we stop screaming and start listening, we’re kinder and gentler to the people around us, and we’re kinder and gentler to ourselves.”

Vulnerability pushed, I pushed back. I lost the fight, but probably won my life back.

– Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*

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The key to understanding Saint Francis’ prevailing attitude of humility is gratitude. For reasons that we will never fully know, he came to see everything within and around him as gift from the gracious King of kings, Lord of lords, the most generous and good God of creation, of salvation and of joy. From the perspective of humility and poverty, he opened his body, mind and heart to the providential care of Almighty Love. It was in total trust—one might add child-like innocence—that he adopted the stance of the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields that “neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet (our) heavenly Father feeds them.” (Matthew 6: 25-34)

Humility enabled Saint Francis to embrace his vulnerability rather than numb it as he had as a frivolous

adolescent. He overcame his fears—fear of his father, fear of unpopularity, fear of leprosy—to live in fragility as a sign of his confidence in his heavenly Father’s unconditional love. Poverty was humility’s bloom. By it, he would declare to God that nothing, save what came from the generous heart of God, held value any longer. No fortress could bring peace to his mind; no fortune or fame could bring joy to his heart. Only the love of God could deliver him from the demons that haunted him.

There are many references to humility in the writings of Saint Francis. One that stands out for me is article 19 of the Admonitions, which some have called “The Franciscan Sermon on the Mount.” In it, he writes, “Blessed is the servant who esteems himself not better when he is praised and exalted by people than when he is considered unworthy, simple and despicable; for what a man is before God, that he is and nothing more.” I would add, “And nothing less.”

The insight here, I believe, is twofold. First, it liberates us from the often-self-serving judgment of others. When someone pays us a complement or registers a complaint, it is very often more of a reflection on them than it is on us. Yet that opinion can weigh heavily on our psyche and distract us from our mission. Second, it suggests that God has a fairer estimation of us—at once dignifying and edifying. We are neither worthless nor hopeless in his eyes.

Humility put Saint Francis in right relationship with God and others. Paired with poverty it recognized our dependency on God and our desire for nothing that does not come from God. It was the foundation of virtue, the model of Christ-like behaviour and the antidote to pride that infects the heart and leads to all manner of sin. Humility also serves as a counterweight to offset the tendency in all of us to judge others, often harshly and unfairly.

Humility is highly valued in Franciscan spirituality and is a necessary predisposition to contemplative prayer because it is the gateway to Truth. Our regard for talent and abilities are balanced with the knowledge that they are not from us or even for us. They have value inasmuch as we use them to play our part in the building of a Kingdom of Love.

Saint Francis’ desire to serve in humility...provides the key to understanding the poverello.

– Regis Armstrong and Ignatius Brady, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*

MAY 2012

Mark Elvins OFM Cap writes, “The beauty of creation, its order and harmony, bespeaks a divine Creator. Creation is not therefore just a backdrop for human activity, it is a sacramental sign of the presence of God. The meaning and purpose of God is the outpouring of his love and a sign of his prodigal generosity. The lesson of creation is the glory of God, for creation glorifies God by its very existence.”

He adds that “in this way Bonaventure views creation as sacramental and all created things as signs of God’s presence. The world and all creation can in this way be understood ‘as a means of God’s self revelation, so that, like a mirror’ it can reflect God’s glory and lead humans to love and praise the Creator. This Franciscan view of the world is echoed by St Angela of Foligno, who proclaimed that the world was ‘pregnant with God’. This book of creation was understood by Bonaventure to be a book of divine wisdom, made visible to all.”

The contemplation of God’s goodness that is daily expressed through creation is perhaps the most powerful impetus to prayer—prayer of the heart, of praise and thanksgiving. Everyone familiar with Franciscan spirituality knows the exquisite Canticle of Creation that was written by Saint Francis of Assisi who, in mystical exhilaration, inebriated by the love of God, extolled poetically the wonders of God’s handiwork.

As I reflected recently on his Canticle, I was moved by its power to reveal the ubiquitous fingerprint of God on every inch of our natural surroundings, and wrote, as a result, this adaptation.

A Song of Seasons

Inspired by The Canticle of Creation by Saint Francis of Assisi

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong.
Be praised, my Lord, by all the Seasons.

Praised be you, my Lord, by lovely Spring,
especially by Brother Sun.
You give new life through him,
and he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be you, my Lord, by Sister Water,
running energetically from melting white mountains,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by fiddleheads and buds,
Chicks and tadpoles and cubs,
by furred and feathered pilgrims
entering the eternal sanctuary of sacred communion.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by Easter chants and childish laughter,
on muddy paths along scented trees.
Yours is the riddle and lyric of praise.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by every living thing
pregnant with potential,
which is filled with your Spirit.

Praised be you, my Lord, for lively Summer,
by flowers of every shape and shade,
which brings perfect joy
to the hearts of my sisters and brothers.

Praised be you, my Lord, by Earth,
that sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits and vegetables and herbs,
which make us strong for the journey ahead.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by monarchs that rest on velvet petals,
sovereign in enchanted gardens
filled with celebration.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by the breath of every living thing,
hopping, galloping, soaring, swimming,
transcending civil virtues
to a realm of holy meaning.

Praised be you, my Lord, by artful Autumn,
by Sister Harvest Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by forests ablaze
with crimson and gold;
enveloping birds and mammals
with broad loving wings.

Praised by you, my Lord,
by hope hoarding
nutritious berries and seeds,
trusting the stingless dawn,

with resurrected faith in Love.

Praised be you, my Lord, by wonder-filled Winter,
by Brother Northern Wind,
and by the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
you give power to your creatures.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by glass-covered lakes,
giving rest to sleepy life.
Their stillness mirrors your peace.

Praised be you, my Lord,
by billowing dunes of snow,
shimmering with delight,
holding tenderly in their protective womb
warrants of transformation.

Blessed are those whom Sister Winter will
holds in the most holy hope,
for new life shall embrace them warmly.

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

AMEN

Contemplative prayer allows us to enter, to varying degrees, the mystery of God manifest in the universe that he created as self-effusing love. Like the apostles who accompanied Jesus to Mount Tabor, it reveals to our consciousness a glimpse into the splendour of Love and Truth, but, again like in the case of the Transfiguration as well as the Epiphany, the experience is not the end of a journey but it inevitably leads to a mission—a return to daily life by another road. (Cf. X, y)

Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of Nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

JUNE 2012

Essentially, contemplative prayer is an awareness of God that is intuitive. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* states that it is “the presence of God (is) apprehended not by thought but by love.” Many things can serve as catalyst for contemplative prayer. We tend to think spontaneously of striking scenery and grace-filled events as classic triggers. One of the most fruitful is praying with scripture.

Saint Francis has often been described as a mystic, which is another way of saying that his religious insights were the result of contemplation. He saw God in creation. He saw God in the poor. And he saw God in the wisdom of the Gospel to which he dedicated his life. The Gospel for Saint Francis would be the alpha and the omega of his spirituality.

The Gospel had a special significance for Saint Anthony, too. He approached it with a heart that was open to more than its literal meaning. In it, he saw the overflowing self-communication of Love.

We find evidence of God reaching out to humanity throughout the bible. He made himself accessible so that we could enter into a meaningful relationship of mutual faith, hope and love. Jesus is the ultimate rapprochement between God and us. Because of the Incarnation, through our human experience, we can touch the heart of God.

There is nothing more awesome than that. This is precisely what struck Saint Francis to the core of his being. Quoting the Gospel in the words of John, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Until that moment a care-free youth, Saint Francis would never exhaust the meaning of that verse. He would devote his life to responding with his entire being with such singular and uncompromising focus that he even became at times the object of derision.

God is manifest in countless acts of love. The Gospel is first and foremost a story of love. It presents poetically yet concretely the heights, depths and lengths of God’s love for each and every one of us.

So, in religious life, Saint Francis would make time to preach the good news of this uncommon, healing and liberating love. He called anyone who would listen to reform their lives away from fear and the illusion of earthly prestige and power, and shift their attention to counter-intuitive truths: that the last shall be first; that life is secured only by letting go of it; and that love can only be held by giving it away.

Saint Francis’ original intention was to live the Gospel before announcing it, to be an imitator of Christ before being a preacher, to accomplish works of penance before proclaiming them to others.

– Servus Gieben, *Preaching in the Franciscan Order*

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Praying with scripture was the source of the evangelism of Saint Francis. Various passages, especially from the Gospels, arrested his attention, fed his imagination and nourished the discernment that would lead to life-changing decisions. For example, Bonaventure tells us that Saint Francis was profoundly affected by three passages: “If you will be perfect, sell all that you have, and give to the poor;” “Take nothing on your

journey;” and “if anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

For Saint Francis, Jesus was not only the perfect expression of God’s love but the exemplar of what it means to be fully human according to the mind of God. He was obedient to the words of Jesus but perhaps more remarkably he was attentive to the actions of Jesus. Scripture seared in his mind and heart critical moments in the life of Jesus: his birth and death in poverty; his praying and moving about as an itinerant preacher; his embrace of those most marginalized by the elite of society; his rejection of hypocrisy in piety; and even his unwillingness to limit his response to God’s immense love with lukewarm spirituality.

Saint Francis often retreated to solitary places in order to contemplate the fullness of God’s love and his own relationship to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He did this, in part, by focusing on the wonders of creation but mostly by meditating on the Gospel passages that he would hear in Liturgy. We have reason to believe that he had a brilliant memory to recall key verses, especially as these related to the deepest longings of his heart.

Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel.

– *The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, Article 4*

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Whereas the contemplation of the Gospel led Saint Francis to literal imitation of Jesus Christ, it led Saint Anthony (Feast, June 13) to an even deeper exploration of these narratives as poetic images, a sort of divine code with richer meaning than what the story would suggest. A good example is the parable. A parable operates on many different levels, each one valid in its own right.

Saint Anthony explains this method himself in the general prologue to his Sermons for Sundays and Festivals, of which I bought a copy while in Padua two years ago. Each Sunday commentary is explained allegorically, morally and anagogically. At the risk of boring you, allow me explain these terms.

Essentially, an allegory is a prolonged metaphor. It is the literary device by which a deeper meaning is vaguely hidden behind a more obvious one. In the case of scripture, especially with Jesus’ use of parables, it is the use of commonplace stories to reveal a truth much more difficult to understand. Saint Anthony regarded much of the bible in this way. What was hidden behind the stories was for him more important than the narratives themselves.

Paul Spilsbury, the scholar who has recently translated Saint Anthony’s Sermons for the first time in their entirety into English, explains that “in practice, allegory refers to the Christological or ecclesiological significance of the text.” In other words, Saint Anthony uses the allegory to paint a picture of how the Church must help the faithful to live as one body in Christ as represented by the Church.

He adds that Saint Anthony’s presentation is moral inasmuch as he outlines the exigencies of Christian living. In concrete terms, what does it mean to conform our lives to that of Jesus?

And finally, we mean that Saint Anthony preached anagogically in that he spoke of the eschatological significance of biblical texts; in other words, what did Jesus' teachings have to do with death, immortality and a final judgement?

Like Saint Francis, Saint Anthony often referred to the Gospel. But Saint Anthony was wary of taking the Gospel in isolation. He typically compared or "concorded" them with texts drawn from the Old Testament. He also related these evangelical accounts to the Epistles. In fact, it is said that Saint Anthony's preaching was carried forward on a four-wheeled chariot, with the four wheels being the Gospel, his knowledge of history, Epistle and the Introit chant that would precede the readings at Mass.

Church Fathers were often quoted by Saint Anthony as well, especially Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory. As he was trained as an Augustinian friar when he lived in Portugal, we also find quotations from Saint Bernard as well as Pope Innocent III, the Pope of his youth and a man hugely influential in his day.

The content of his preaching is unmistakably Franciscan. His love of Franciscan values is evident in every crafted phrase. Like Saint Francis, he contemplates the wonder of Creation. Where Saint Francis wrote the Canticle of Creation, Saint Anthony used the book of creation to illustrate his teaching, writes Spilsbury. Only, as his education is more advanced, he turns to Aristotle and other writers to give examples.

Another scholar, Daniel Lesnick, points out that the early Franciscans spoke clearly and credibly to the culture of their day. They preached mainly to the rising class of artisans and workers and to the new urban society. The aim of their preaching was to move the faithful to action. Franciscan preaching was not scholastic as was the trend of the time, especially among the Dominicans and learned preachers, but rather vulgarized and accessible as it was in the days of Jesus.

Saint Francis offered his listener wisdom of a faith lived and a living witness to Christ in human life. This tradition is clearly present in the sermons of (Saint Anthony.)

– Vincent Cushing, *Preaching Wisdom to a postmodern People*

JULY 2012

For centuries, *lectio divina* was the sacred door to contemplative prayer. Though typically associated with Benedictine tradition, its practice is particularly well suited to Franciscan spirituality; in part, because of Saint Francis' practice of withdrawing to remote solitudes for prayer and, in part, because of the close association between the first fraternity and local Cistercians.

The term refers to spiritual reading with prayerful reflection, not theological study (neither exegetics nor hermeneutics are intended.) *Lectio* refers to reading as a stimulus to personal prayer and meditation. The purpose is to assimilate divine truth in a manner that strengthens or reforms our living out of faith.

The Rule of Saint Benedict is clear concerning the value of contemplating the word of God: "For anyone hastening on to the perfection of the monastic life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection. What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? Or what book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, besides the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil. For observant and obedient monks, all these are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues."

Some people imagine that *lectio divina* is only suited to monastic life. That perception is quite understandable because our modern lifestyle is much more conducive to rapid reading and short bursts of concentration. We get the point of learning facts and theories but are reticent to sit quietly for long periods while simply ruminating on a word, a phrase, a verse or a short passage.

One method involves reading the sacred text out loud rather than silently because more senses are engaged in the encounter and interaction with the words. Reading aloud with a variation of pacing and intonations also helps to savour the text.

Though the goal is to digest the text and allow it to penetrate the mind and heart, it is worth noting that memorization was originally part of the Benedictine method because it enabled the monk to continue to be inspired by the text outside of formal prayer time. This practice remains fruitful when and where it can be applied.

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading (lectio divina).

– Benedictine Rule 48:1

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Saint Francis spent much of his prayer time contemplating the goodness of God after the inspiration of sacred Scripture. The four Gospels, specifically, were the nourishment and inspiration for his continuous reflection on divine nature and grace. Many verses are quoted by him at various pivotal moments of his life—chiefly his conversion and preparation of the rule that would govern religious life. We can assume that he reflected on these at length.

For instance, verse 9 of Matthew's Gospel, chapter 10: After bidding the apostles to go "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and "proclaim the good news...cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons," Jesus instructed them to "take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belt, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff." The message was understood to advocate purposeful simplicity that is ordained to a sacred task. This would be the practical aspect of evangelical poverty for Saint Francis.

For emphasis, the message would echo in the Gospel of Luke (10: 4): "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road." The verse would call the early brothers to avoid distractions in the resolute pursuit of their mission. And again in Mark's Gospel (6: 8): "He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belt." Saint Francis was criticised for his strict adherence to the vow of poverty but one can hardly question the authenticity of his fidelity to Lady Poverty.

In fact, so attentive was Saint Francis to the wisdom of Holy Scripture that his own writings were little more than a quilt of biblical phrases. This is particularly notable in his Admonitions, often cited as the most significant reflections of his own understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ, and in his Earlier Rule (*Regula Non Bullata.*)

The rule and life of the brothers was developed over a period of many years following the inception of the Order. It begins with a series of four quotations simply linked with the conjunction "and." Matthew 19: 21 refers to the need to dispose of personal possessions in order to follow Jesus; Matthew 16: 24 refers to self-denial and taking up the cross that is unique to each person; Luke 14: 26 instructs the disciple to prefer to follow Jesus above all else, including family and life itself; and Matthew 19:29 adds that leaving family, house and land will be rewarded with eternal life. These are all themes that are familiar in the life of Saint Francis. Clearly, the contemplation of Scripture had a major influence in the development of his spirituality and discernment.

After the Lord gave me brothers, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the firm of the Holy Gospel.

– Saint Francis of Assisi, *My Testament*

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Marcello Montanari recalls in a book on how to prepare *lectio divina* the contemplative prayer life of Saint Francis. In it, he outlines seven steps.

1. Read attentively: Choose a passage from Scripture and read it over very slowly, attentively and devoutly for five to 10 minutes after having prayed to the Holy Spirit to open your mind and heart to fully understand his message. Remember how Saint Francis opened the Lectionary three times in the Church of St. Nicholas to find out what God had in mind for him and his new brothers.
2. Meditate or reflect: Chew and ruminate on the Word of God, and apply what you have read to your life. You must let your life stand before the light of God's Word. Again, look up a text or incident from the life of Saint Francis which would illustrate this for you.

3. Pray: This is your way of responding to the God who has spoken to you. We have an example in Celano where Francis, reflecting upon the Gospel text is so moved, that he changes it into a prayer of praise to God.
4. Contemplate: Under the guidance of the Spirit, little by little, you will feel the desire to see the One who has spoken to you, to taste his love, to contemplate his wonderful deeds. You will even forget yourself to lose yourself in the praise of God and to rejoice in the Spirit as did Saint Francis. This is the path to the highest form of mystical prayer where the soul is lost in an ocean of love.
5. Discern: In the light of the reading which you have prayed over and contemplated, the Spirit helps you to understand what you should do, like the answer to the plea of Saint Francis: “Lord, What do you want me to do?...At Your word I will let down the nets.” Recall examples of choices and decisions from the life of Saint Francis.
6. Live the Word of God: You must begin to form your life according to the words which you have read, according to the life of Christ which you have contemplated ... to live the Gospel. Again we have the example of Saint Francis who was no idle hearer of the Word but hastened to put into practice what he heard.
7. Return to prayer: Again, look to the life of Saint Francis that he dedicated to preaching the message of conversion and reconciliation. The greater part of the year was set aside for prayer and contemplation, the fruit of which was purposeful apostolic action according to the will of the Father, the example of Jesus Christ and the light of the Holy Spirit.

We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

– 1 Corinthians 2: 13

AUGUST 2012

In March, I had the pleasure of staying at the friary of Santa Maria Draperis in the historically fascinating and culturally vibrant city of Istanbul, Turkey. It is home to an International Franciscan Fraternity that serves to encourage encounter and dialogue with other religions present in the region, especially Islam and Judaism, but also the other Christian Churches, particularly the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Armenian Orthodox community.

Four friars from four different continents animate the centre in the spirit of Saint Francis' own experience of inter-religious dialogue at Damietta where he met sultan Kamil-al-Malik in 1219, at the height of the fifth Christian Crusade.

I realized while I was there how important the link is between inter-religious dialogue and contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer provides a ground of authentic and intuitive exploration of the great mysteries of our faith that is often blocked by theoretical models, conventional theologies and socio-political categories.

I refer to contemplative prayer here as the direct intuition of reality, what some call "pure awareness," which is sometimes erroneously limited to mysticism. In fact, insights are much more accessible via contemplative prayer than many imagine. The contemplative state is not a void, nor is it an illusory form of purity or silence or serenity. These are just as enslaving as other kinds of addictions. Rather, it is a balanced regard for what is neither filtered by bias nor embellished by fantasizing a false reality outside of what simply is. So it serves as a guard against making idols out of our own ideas about God and our relationship with God and others.

Meanwhile, I write about inter-religious dialogue as something other than the lazy path that leads to the blurring of established traditions. Such ambiguities fail to deepen understanding.

To see things differently, it helps to stand in a different place. Sometimes, seeing something from the outside is seeing it for the first time; as with understanding Christianity in a new way by considering its similarities with other religious traditions. Contemplative dialogue is authentic listening, without preconceptions or preconditions. It takes wisdom to walk in the garden of another person and leave no footprint yet still savour the sweet fragrances.

*To go beyond the limits of each religion and realize the transcendent mystery which is manifest in all of them...
we're all pilgrims on a journey to the beyond...*

– Bede Griffiths, interview, August 1992

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In 1986, Pope John Paul II stated unequivocally during the landmark day of inter-religious prayer for peace at Assisi, every authentic prayer is brought about by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.

Indeed, all that is true, good and noble in religious traditions can be attributed to the action of the spirit of

God. Such was the declaration of the president of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, made in Assisi in 2005. He added that when followers of different religions contemplate the actions of God, they begin to recognize that all that is good in any religion is the work of the spirit of God: “A contemplative attitude is at the basis of inter-religious dialogue.”

The example of Saint Francis is striking; it is also timely. Many people today are repelled by established religious because of our failure to pursue common objectives and model fraternal behaviour that is so clearly prescribed by sacred texts.

Inter-religious dialogue, to be truly authentic, must meet certain conditions. A paper prepared in 1994 by Pierre-Francois de Béthune, OSB, refers to the need to assure a solid foundation by creating a harmonious environment; engaging in dialogue with maturity (common sense, realism, humor, solid human maturity, psychological balance and without anxiety); a deep sense of personal rootedness in the community and the Church, in the Christian tradition and in a program of spiritual maintenance that aids discernment. Moreover, the spiritual movement must be verified by examining the intensity of the desire and the purity of motivation.

The dialogue itself, he adds, must be evaluated according to criteria for discernment, including those related to authenticity and authority. For example, New Age representations of ancient traditions are often lacking vital elements of context and content; and some purveyors of such spiritual information write with more knowledge and insight than others.

In all circumstances, the dialogue must be marked not only by competence but also pertinence, universality, incarnation and interiority. Caution must be exercised regarding the temptation to overstate similarities when considering elements of teaching or practice; to gloss over various views of the relationship between body and spirit; action and contemplation; as well the proper roles of nature and grace.

Dom Bede Griffiths reflected deeply on contemplative prayer and inter-religious dialogue during his life. He observed that the image that favored these is that of pilgrimage. Such a perspective predisposed participants to ongoing change in the hope of encounter with the sacred and spiritual transformation. He pointed out that the sacred writings of Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity are filled with accounts of physical movement in association with pivotal events.

Pilgrimage, according to Griffiths, can be understood as movement along a series of horizons with the passing from horizon to horizon as stages of self-transcendence. The energy for this sometimes arduous journey comes from an intrinsic need to keep going beyond where we are: the One beyond all...beyond thought altogether...beyond concepts is revealed through the power of the non-rational mind, always conveyed symbolically.

Some people fear contemplative prayer, especially when associated with inter-faith dialogue because, they assume contemplative traditions to be anti-intellectual. That is a label that is sometimes ascribed to Zen Buddhists as well as Franciscans and Cistercians. On the contrary, we run a great risk of missing the point when we place our whole trust in books and in learning, and neglect to grasp life in its existential reality.

Griffiths would not have denied the value of dialogue that is informed and rational. But he probably would have suggested that it is inadequate and probably limiting. Rather, an encounter that is hospitable

to the mystery of another is most penetrating and insightful when it also embraces elements that cannot be conceptualized and verbalized. Faced with growing dangers related to racial and religious violence, eco degradation and a growing threat of nuclear annihilation, Griffiths placed increasing confidence in the contemplative experience and personal integration. He believed that the key to the impasse was to be found in lay contemplative communities, not at the expense of one's own tradition but to the benefit of all traditions.

At each stage of discovery of another tradition there should be a corresponding rediscovery of one's own.

– Pierre-François de Béthune, OSB, Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue

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Inter-religious dialogue that is authentic and respectful, and is rooted in contemplative prayer may well be the tonic that is required for the ailments that afflict our times. Beyond its capacity to unite and celebrate the mystery of divinity in the human condition, it may serve as the clarion call to people who yearn for another way of living that is less stressful, less polarizing and less cynical. Perhaps it is in the irony of fewer words achieving more dialogue that the salvation of our world exists. Maybe purity of heart is best evidenced by faith, hope and love in one another in the light of a universalizing and integrating God, at once within and beyond.

May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.

– John 17: 21

SEPTEMBER 2012

In the course of finding God in all situations, which is the rich discovery of contemplative prayer, we are often surprised to find that God is revealed in sadness as well as joy; in darkness as well as light; in doubt as well as faith. What each setting has in common is vulnerability. The essence of a contemplative attitude seems to be vulnerability, writes Veronica Ward, author of an article that appeared 10 years ago in *Spiritual Life Magazine*.

As often is the case, her experience of personal failure was the fertile soil of spiritual development. But the contemplation of failure is only fruitful if we accept beforehand that such a possibility exists. For many people, failure has no redeeming value and must be thrown behind without the slightest consideration.

She adds, "Suffering is not good in and of itself, but the contemplative person may put suffering to good use." Fullness and failure may appear to be opposites. Essentially they are opposites but inextricably tied. They are two sides of the same coin, coexisting in symbiotic relationship.

Saint Francis had his share of suffering: imprisonment, illness, betrayal, rejection. He knew Gethsemane and Golgotha well. He also knew perfect joy. He experienced the joy of the Nativity and the joy of the Resurrection so intimately, in large measure, because he embraced the anguish and agony of the cross out of love for Christ Crucified. Marked by the stigmata, his reward was incomparable joy that, in his words, "Christ gives to his friends (for) conquering oneself and willingly enduring sufferings, insults, humiliations, and hardships for the love of Christ."

It is in the confidence of knowing, as Saint Paul writes, "whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12: 10) that we can accept failure as merely a milestone on the journey of spiritual progress. But how can we arrive at a genuine understanding of this paradox without a contemplative attitude, one that does not prejudice the value of an encounter with what stands before us or a sudden awareness of what sits inside us?

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

– John 10: 10

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Philip Simmons' promising literary career was just taking flight when he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. Adjusting to this harsh reality was very difficult but he chose to claim each moment of life by writing about his experience and agreeing to allow scenes to be filmed for a full year at his home in New Hampshire with his wife and young children. His book is called *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. The feature documentary, *The Man who Learned to Fall*, debuted in Montreal in 1994. A few years ago, I had the privilege of hearing a presentation to a group of therapists by its producer, Gary Beitel.

Part of the process of accepting loss for Simmons was a conviction that there is a silver lining to every cloud. He described a boyhood leap from rocks high above a pool of emerald clear water ten feet deep: "My eyes are focused downward on the water rushing toward my feet, and I am happy, terrified, alive...we are all falling—all of us—falling. We are all, now, in the moment, in the midst of that descent...If we are falling toward pain and weakness, let us also fall toward sweetness and strength. If we are falling toward death, let

us also fall toward life.”

The genius of his book is in the word “learning.” It suggests two things. We can learn lessons from falling that help us to get up again, and we can learn how to fall as stuntmen and sportsmen to lessen the risk of serious injury from subsequent falls. We can avoid some falls but we cannot avoid them all. Pain, grief and loss are as much part of the human landscape as joy and growth. We learn to adjust our life strategies. Sometimes we even have to adjust our goals.

Like debilitating illness, growing older can feel like defeat, like losing the battle to live abundantly. We cannot achieve as much, as fast or sometimes even as well. We seem less productive, at least by the standard that the modern world measures success. We feel obliged to impress others with contributions that are valued in economic terms but cannot. Paradoxically, falling can be the direction of failure or of deepening. There is a richness to be discovered in what lies below the superficialities of modernity.

Falling is also an image that is used by Richard Rohr in his latest book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. As Rohr points out in the dust jacket notes, “Climbing, achieving, and performing will not serve us as we grow older...eventually we need to see ourselves in a different and more life-giving way. This message of ‘falling down’ is the most resisted and counterintuitive of messages in the world’s religions, including and most especially Christianity.”

The key to understanding the message of Christianity in regard to falling upward is the theological mystery surrounding the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. In order to achieve unfathomable joy, Jesus had to endure unspeakable suffering. While his story may be more dramatic than ours, it is not irrelevant to ours. Some suffering in the human experience is not only inevitable, it is necessary. Carl Jung called this “legitimate suffering.” The evangelist Matthew referred to it with paradoxical wit: “Anyone who wants to save his life, must lose it. Anyone who loses his life will find it.”

Let us pray that if we are falling from grace, dear God let us also fall with grace, to grace.

– Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall*

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Contemplative prayer doesn’t allow us to dwell in weakness or failure, or remain mired in negativity. Rather, it urges us to recognize that set-backs are real but that they do not define us unless we let them. All situations contain seeds of hope and joy. The contemplative mind sees and nurtures these seeds as the vital gifts of life that are unique to such situations. The contemplative attitude is one of abundance.

The contemplative eye is a healthy one, free from the infection of regret and anxiety, the blindness of ignorance, the myopia of fear, and the cataracts of defeatism. It allows light and shadow to reach the soul without judgement and reveal truth unblemished. The contemplative heart embraces light with joy and shadow with the consolation of deeper understanding. The contemplative spirit is alert to truth and love, which are to be found in proportions equal to freedom from fear and falseness. Contemplative prayer expects and finds grace in all situations.

As the prologue to John’s Gospel reads, “A light shines in the darkness, a light that darkness cannot

overcome.” Contemplative prayer seeks and finds that light, no matter how faint it appears to be at first. Then, as it draws nearer, the light grows larger and larger until it fills all the dark spaces outside and inside. Sadly, most of us do not know this light; we do not trust that it exists or that it has the power to overcome the darkness.

Light is life. Shadows merely frame it. But like all frames, they can also serve to emphasize beauty, and to attract our gaze and awe. The light that darkness cannot overcome is blinding to those who seek *bling* instead. In time, the dazzle of human artifices diminishes and finally is extinguished by the despair of certain disappointment. Aging gracefully, accepting defeat graciously, and bearing adversity generously are what provide the discernment that is needed to recognize the true light that grows and endures, and satisfies our deepest yearning.

Contemplative prayer welcomes success spontaneously but soberly. It also examines failure with humility and care. The lessons of failure are practical and should never become pathological. Failure must never impair hope or injure confidence that is rooted in healthy self-understanding. Nor should it ever be permitted to undermine faith in God, in others or in our true and higher self. When others disappoint us, we must move forward with prudence and perseverance. When we disappoint ourselves, we must continue to advance with optimism.

But because set-backs on the journey of life often arrest movement that may have come from an unconscious drive or reckless will, they should be regarded as privileged moments to deepen our awareness of internal and external dynamics as well as the inter-dependencies between ourselves and others; between ourselves and God; and between sometimes conflicted parts of our personality. In the complex operation of the human body, mind and spirit, things may have fallen out of alignment. It is never too late to deal with the conditions that led to failure—lovingly, judiciously and prayerfully.

It takes courage to confess and confront weakness without averting to denial or shrinking into shame or regret. It takes wisdom to stand in the gap between paralysis and growth. Sometimes, it takes the reassuring accompaniment of a friend, a spiritual director or a therapist to take that stand and hold that ground, and then to move forward freely.

How surely gravity's law, strong as an ocean current, takes hold of even the smallest thing and pulls it toward the heart of the world... This is what the things can teach us: to fall, patiently to trust our heaviness.

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*

OCTOBER 2012

As far back as I can recall, I have valued simplicity. Fashionable clothes, sporty cars and other paraphernalia of success have never appealed to me, as my mother once reminded me, despairing as I left the house wearing uncoordinated, thread-bare clothes. Intuitively, I have always understood simplicity to be synonymous with real beauty, universal truth and deep inner peace.

The simplicity of truth and beauty is a marvel to behold, indeed to be contemplated, in its rich range of colors and palpable textures. Like poetry, art or music, it seems that meaning is strangely summarized in the economy of simple verses, strokes and notes. Complexity, on the other hand, seems often to be the enemy of truth, especially when thoughts become convoluted and the language used to express them is opaque. Complexity is the enemy of beauty when it denatures the order and grace of creation.

In these times especially, people yearn for simplicity in the midst of manipulated desires, and lives filled with toxic stress, and endless rules designed to suit an elite and not those they are intended to serve, whether in commerce or politics. They feel like unwilling passengers on a dehumanizing and meaningless expedition that promises prosperity and pleasure but actually delivers desolation at the price of meaning, peace and true joy.

Why is simplicity so desired but so elusive? Why is it so prized and yet we almost always lean away from it? I propose that contemplative prayer helps to answer such questions and, more importantly, to channel our understanding and decisions in a way that brings us closer to this holy grail, which lies—even in the very best circumstances—beyond our reach and grasp.

Poets, artists and musicians may well be the best teachers in the curriculum of simplicity. Poets know that verses are nothing but random clusters of words if they lack a simple golden thread connecting images to one cosmic idea. Artists know that each classic painting has one unifying point. Musicians would pollute our world with chords of cacophony without simple melodies.

The contemplation of nature also teaches us that behind diversity lies unity. But we only get to see that unity if we give up our usual ambition of subjugating and exploiting creation. Sister Mother Nature, as Saint Francis called her in his Canticle of Creation, only reveals her simple, sacred secrets to those who regard her respectfully with contemplative eyes. Against those who would dominate and abuse her, she puts up a shield of impenetrable complexity. To those who would rape her, she reveals—sometimes dramatically, even violently—their foolishness. Hers is the last word, truth.

The spiritualities of all great world religions teach us letting go: how to step aside.

– Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Art of Living*

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Paradoxically, the human spirit is divided between an aspiration for freedom and an inclination for security in slavery; between genuine simplicity and the illusion of simplicity in insidious forms of complexity; and, in some cases, between liberation and the idolization of complexity. It craves for simplicity but is infatuated by complexity. As a result, simplicity is often overwhelmed by complexity. For that reason, the key to

simplicity is often not in learning how to practice simplicity but in unlearning complexity.

Simplicity is difficult to achieve and harder to maintain. The truth of this statement is underscored by our own frustration. Some people reach discouragement in the fight against tyrannical complexities in their family life, community life, church life, not to mention national and world affairs. Unless simplicity is firmly held as a foundational discipline, complexity becomes rationalized and simplicity is dismissed as simplistic. Therefore, those who value simplicity must search for deeper understanding and practical solutions that address the dissonant realities of hectic lives.

Simplicity has deep biblical roots and has marked most, if not all, of the saints whose lives we honour. Among the factors that affect its practice are the need to know who we are at the core; the knowledge of fragmentation that comes from many inward selves; the need to be in perpetual communion with God, the source of life; and our capacity for gratitude.

Richard Foster, an insightful Christian author of the Quaker tradition, wrote a guide, which he recently updated, for finding harmony in a complex world by confronting “the complexity of simplicity.” He proposes a series of principles that help to put its practice into perspective. First, durable simplicity is an outcome rather than something that we construct. In fact, it is a grace given to us by God, a “disciplined grace.” Second, we will inevitably struggle to stay on course as we face doubts about the choices that we have made. Third, balance must be kept between inner simplicity and various lifestyle choices.

Inward simplicity is obedience to the hunger for God that makes us dissatisfied with anything synthetic. It is achieved by continuously going deeper into the truth of ourselves and the central purpose of our lives. Inner simplicity requires humility and detachment. Outward simplicity is to focus on the purpose of our lives rather than the rules and conventions over which we often obsess. Simplicity also urges us to unplug from our consumptive society and measure success by standards other than power, prestige or property.

Fundamentally, health and happiness rest on our capacity for simplicity. Mindfulness is the protector of simplicity. Each step, word and bite becomes an expression of a delicious desire rather than the mindful binging that used to reveal our compulsive cravings. Stillness and silence now suffice where distractions were needed to mask our inner confusion. Frugality has become abundance, not deprivation.

There are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.

– G. K. Chesterton

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In recent years, I have come to understand simplicity as the fruit of prayer that seeks to discern one’s unique identity and particular vocation, and the foundation of gratitude, which leads to happiness. Simplicity is a decision, an option for what matters most.

Simplicity is not based on a resignation to our incapacity to control our inner and outer universe. It is a celebration of gratitude for the intrinsic goodness of life. This is fundamental. Despite deceit, violence and the widespread prevalence of sin, it is my deep conviction that God still says that what he created is good, and we can see that elemental reality too in the frame of simplicity and through the lens of gratitude.

The deal is that these two qualities of life are inseparable and symbiotic in relationship. There can be no genuine gratitude without simplicity. And simplicity will not endure without gratitude. Moreover, without an appreciation of who we are and what our purpose is, simplicity remains elusive, and gratitude, which is the acknowledgement of abundance in the context of simplicity, eludes us also.

That is why I often explain that there exists a chain that begins with contemplative prayer, which helps to reveal us to ourselves by focusing on the larger picture rather than on the fear-ridden ego; extends into simplicity, which connects only the necessary dots in order to make decisions that are intentional; then gratitude for everything as gifts that are needed for our unique mission; then generosity of spirit or love, which sees grace overflowing; and joy, which is the fruit of love.

The culture of appreciation helps to understand that less really is more, and with that understanding we help to gain enough for all.

– Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*

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Contemplative prayer is a deep awareness of what stands before, inside and above us. It reveals truth about our world beyond sensible evidence. It expands our awareness of who we truly are and evaporates illusions. It opens our heart and mind to the truth of love. Simply stated, contemplative prayer sees through the barriers that would otherwise obscure our view and deny us the insights that are needed to develop our God-given gifts and grow into our full potential of joy.

Contemplative prayer leads to deeper awareness but it also changes our way of living, which in turn continues to raise our consciousness progressively. The change takes us to mindful living—mindfulness in the choices that we make whether in response to our basic human wants, needs and desires, or to the pressures of our modern consumptive society that tend to define on our behalf what self-actualization means.

Mindfulness is a process by which we focus our thinking and the energy behind everything that we do on an anticipated set of results and their ultimate outcomes. Contemplative prayer is the gateway to mindfulness because it makes us broadly aware of existing circumstances, the potential for improvement and the trail that must be blazed in order to reach that destination.

An important distinction must however be made between secular and religious mindfulness. The secular world equates mindfulness with the willful pursuit of self-satisfaction. Religious tradition, particularly the contemplative tradition, focuses mindfulness on God's will as the means of achieving authenticity. Therefore, it is expressed as humility and availability.

So it is with mindful living, which seeks to adhere to particular values, such as taking time for family and friends, despite the pressures of a demanding career; or favour specific priorities, such as advancing in education despite crippling financial challenges. Mindful living acts strategically to overcome distractions in order to grasp the pearl of infinite value. It is methodical rather than impulsive; perseverant rather than stubborn. Mindfulness is mindful of particular blessings that escape the notice of those who are single-minded about selfish motives and inattentive to grace.

At each moment, (St. Therese of Lisieux)'s sole concern is to carry out the will of God as it was revealed to her second to second.

– Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*

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Simplicity is spontaneously associated with Franciscan spirituality. It is the practical expression of evangelical poverty that the poverello lived in a radical way. Simplicity gave Saint Francis a great deal of freedom from the constraints of an economically driven world. He used this freedom to focus his attention on what really mattered to him, the face of God in Creation.

Simplicity is also the alpha and the omega of a mindful lifestyle. Simplicity is not possible without being mindful in our choices, nor is mindfulness possible without a willingness to travel light, that is, the encumbrance of unnecessary baggage or ambiguous plans. Ultimately, the purpose of simplicity is to

increase our capacity to focus on the moment at hand, where awareness of God is at its highest potential.

Ernest Larkin, O. Carm. pointed out that the well established practice of awareness of God's presence does make possible a direct line of communication between the person and God but could lead to "abstractness...a mere nod of the mind to a theological truth with minimal resonance in one's being." One might say that mindfulness completes and even incarnates a divinely inspired intuition by allowing God to soak into every part of the body, mind and spirit.

Alluding to the classic spiritual discipline of recollection, what St. Teresa of Avila called "the soul collecting its faculties together and entering within itself to be with its God," Larkin links true recollection to Christian mindfulness through presence to the moment: "recollection and mindfulness, separately and together, emphasize full commitment of one's whole being to the moment at hand. They demand awareness of one's self, the action, and the God who is there."

*Mindfulness fights the enemies of wholeness...our unfreedoms and attachments, our sins and imperfections...
Mindfulness faces these temptations head on by maintaining attention to the call of faith.*

– Ernest Larkin, *Christian Mindfulness*

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Joy is the fruit of mindfulness. This applies to the mundane activities as well as the grand projects of life. The beauty of mindful behaviour is that it increases pleasure. Slowing things down in order to become more aware of them and of their effects makes it possible to savour the sight, sound, smell, touch and taste of what we chose with full intentionality. Conversely, acting reflexively and in haste numbs our senses. With time, we lose sensitivity to subtle aromas, soft notes and gentle movements. Only the strongest stimuli then connect to the brain.

In many ways, this tendency is well summarized in our approach to food. Many of us tend to eat mindlessly, too fast and without much appreciation for the range of flavours that cross our palate. Once having eaten, we are not likely to be aware of the effect of food on our bodies and intellect, unless the reaction is sudden and dramatic. Except when it eventually results in illness, we are unlikely to register the differences between healthy and unhealthy foods. That's because when we do not eat intentionally, the appropriate cues are overwhelmed by whatever is actually the focus of our attention: a conversation, a newspaper or simply a thought about what we must do after finishing the "chore" at hand.

Respecting our body and the disposition that is needed to live holy, whole lives requires mindfulness. Mindfulness is a kind of prayer, one that should be constant. It is a prayer of gratitude in that it acknowledges everything as gift, and it is a prayer of discipleship in that it receives everything as material that is ordained to a particular mission.

Attentiveness and delight are the best ways of nourishing the body and the self. One author claims that traditional diets are doomed to failure because they depend on willpower, which we tend to associate with effort and sacrifice, to assure the good choices in the quality and quantity of eating. Eisenstein prefers enjoyment as a barometer, which he assumes to indicate that the body's true needs are being met. He understands enjoyment to be the result of careful preparation, slow tasting: "Chew your beverages." He

further suggests that attentiveness must extend to the effects and feelings generated by digestion and later absorption by the body.

Another example of mindfulness is breathing. We tend to breathe in as hurried a manner as we do other things. Breath is a proxy for life. Our stress is revealed by shallow and erratic breathing. Sometimes, we catch ourselves and take a few slow and deep breaths, inhaling goodness and exhaling dark emotions. When we do, we feel great. Too soon, however, we resume mindless, superficial breathing that neither provides adequate oxygen to brain nor rest to the heart.

The premise and proof of mindful living is authentic enjoyment. By contemplating what is, and doing so gratefully and prayerfully, we come to hear our body and soul as it expresses delight or revulsion, depending on what is presented. Mindfulness trusts our senses and intuitions to sort through the chaos, and to discern what is whole and holy, what is edifying as opposed to what is toxic. Not to be confused with false pleasures that strive to satiate compulsions and addictions, the joy that is obtained by listening attentively to the body and the heart is pure.

So it is with the more spiritual aspects of mindfulness, including prayer—whether liturgical, discursive, meditative or contemplative. Larkin wrote, “If we want to live intentionally with commitment to what we are about, we have to gather up ourselves in recollection and be involved in what we are doing. It is a short step to being in touch with the God hidden in the moment.” He added, “We enter (each moment) with wonder and gratefulness and with a receptive heart. This is contemplative living; it is living in God’s presence and cultivating the moment.”

Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.

– Aesop



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