

Bringing out of our storehouse the flesh and blood of our tradition in such a way as to feed future generations . . .

*The Prophetic Heart* (1994) — Joseph P. Chinnici OFM



## The TAU

From the time of Ezekiel the sign of the **TAU**, marked on the forehead of those turning to God in faith and repentance has long represented faithfulness and wholehearted love. It was used for healing and victory.

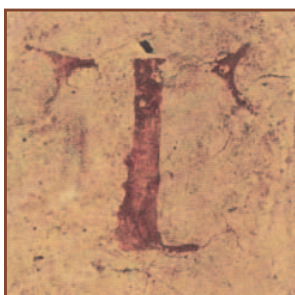
Pope Innocent III, evoked the sign of the **TAU from Ezekiel** when opening the Fourth Lateran Council in 1216 calling for the renewal of the Church, “*Mercy will be granted to those to bear the TAU, a mark of a life of penance and renewal in Christ.*”

And so Francis, who was present at the Council, wanted to sign himself with the **TAU**, and his brothers along with him. The **TAU** became the sign of the little Band’s mission: the preaching of faith and repentance (Rule of 1221:23).

Thomas of Celano, writing in 1252, notes, “The **TAU** symbol had, above all others, his preference. Francis used it as a signature for his letters, and he painted a drawing of it on the walls of all the cells.” One of these paintings, believed to be created by Francis, is found in the little chapel of Mary Magdalen at Fonte Columbo in the Rieti Valley where Francis wrote his Rule.

Another very precious document, housed in the Basilica of St. Francis, is Francis’ own handwritten blessing for Brother Leo — signed with the **TAU**.

*Above all else, the TAU meant mission for Francis: a mission to proclaim the Goodness of God by a wholehearted following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ because of whom all life is sacred.*



## A FRANCISCAN EXPERIENCE OF LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

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(First written, 1984; edited and condensed 2020)

This paper is a response to a document called *Apostolic Spirituality in View of the Kingdom* published in 1983 by the International Union of Superiors General (UISG).

No Franciscans had been included on the writing committee for that document.

This response reflects on the character of the Franciscan evangelical spiritual tradition as distinct from the apostolic.



Although this paper was written almost 40 years ago, it might have relevance for today’s society and church. Apostolic spirituality becomes attractive for members of the Franciscan family particularly at times of social stress and the need to “fix things,” and at times when the Church becomes more defensive in its teaching before the changes provided by historical circumstances:

**RELIGIOUS PLURALISM,**

**GLOBAL VIOLENCE,**

**THE LOSS OF PUBLIC INFLUENCE,**

**DIVERSITY WITHIN THE ECCLESIAL BODY,**

**THE COUPLING WITHIN THE CHURCH OF POWER AND MONEY.**

Today more than ever we must not shape our way of life from forces *outside the charism*. The Evangelical Life discerns what is happening, but takes a different posture before social change and ecclesial discord. Its stance is prophetic, always willing to begin with God’s goodness and power in the world, and to depend on the mercy, freedom and charity with which God created all things through the Word who became our Brother.

**T** *The Evangelical Life discovers God in the condition of being human. The Evangelical stance, in the midst of challenges, is a prophetic stance of hope. It is the affirmation of the presence of Love at the heart of all things.*

# APOSTOLIC SPIRITUALITY

The UISG document summarizes apostolic spirituality, emphasizing its **ecclesial character**, with the following points: It is a spirituality:

- **centered** in God-love (pastoral charity) and in Christ the Spouse of the Church (sacraments of salvation). It is for each particular person in the vicissitudes of his/her life on earth (apostolic and caritative action).
- **born**, by means of the founder, of the living essence of the Church and demands fidelity to the spirit of its origins (“from the Church”).
- **structured** according to the unique nature of the mystical Body of Christ and demands the grace of unity between interiority and activity (“in the Church”).
- **of active** communion with the People of God in their earthly mission and demands adequate participation in missionary and pastoral tasks (“with the Church”).
- **directed** with eschatological boldness towards the absolute future and demands awareness and prophetic inventiveness (“for the Kingdom”).



## The document describes *key concepts of apostolic religious life*:

- From the sixteenth century onwards, typically monastic elements were abandoned so as to allow dedication to works of evangelization or charitable activity with the object of being *completely available to God in the act of saving the world*.
- The basic experience is related to that of the *primitive Christian community* (Acts 4:32).
- It is qualified by a particular experience of *sacred ministry and the task of charity*.
- Its special work of charity results from *intimate union with Christ*. Such work is consigned by the Church to be discharged in her name. (See *Perfectae Caritatis* #8)
- It demands a special sense of *ecclesial communion* — a common contribution in collaboration with the bishops and pope.

## The document also describes the *theological dimensions of apostolic spirituality*:

- God’s Kingdom needs to be established.
- God created life where formerly there was only chaos and darkness.
- God is Love, dynamic energy, involved in the world.
- Humanity is in a state of need where misery and anguish prevail.
- Within the world it is the “little ones,” the poor who call for special ministry.
- Christ comes on mission to overcome darkness and reconcile the whole universe to himself. He redeems the world by his obedience.
- The mission of the Father demanded a radical insertion of Jesus into the world, brought about by means of kenosis (Phil. 2:6-11).
- Jesus is the model of the reconciliation of action and contemplation.
- Jesus, sending his Spirit, creates the Church, dedicated to the salvation of the world.
- Salvific action is of the very nature of apostolic religious life. (Based on the Thomistic understanding of the relationship between God and the world, of sin, and of the consequent need for a redeemer, this emphasizes salvific activity in the passion. The incarnation is a response to need; it restores order to chaos, light to darkness.)
- The prophetic dimension of apostolic spirituality requires total involvement in human needs, humble and disinterested service, promotion of mercy and justice especially where evangelical values have been set aside.
- Apostolic spirituality models the prayer of Jesus who spent himself for people and yet slipped away for contemplation.

## THE FRANCISCAN TRADITION

The foundations of the Franciscan spiritual tradition clearly *antedate* an apostolic religious spirituality as understood above. If we are to take our founding charism seriously we must go back to what Francis and Clare and the early mendicant orders understood about the *Vita*

*vere apostolica* (“truly apostolic life”).<sup>1</sup> The development of the mendicant orders occurred within the context of a debate over the meaning of apostolic life during the early twelfth century. Rupert of Deutz argued that the monastic life was the apostolic life. It was based on the life led by the apostles, the life of the primitive community as described in Acts 4:32. This life recommends the abandonment of all private goods in favor of the common life. However, later in the twelfth century, emerging forms of religious life argued that preaching and proselytizing should also be included in the notion of apostolic life. Eventually, the argument came to focus on the difference between *vita monastica* and *vita apostolica*, the main point of difference being how preaching was to be understood and integrated.

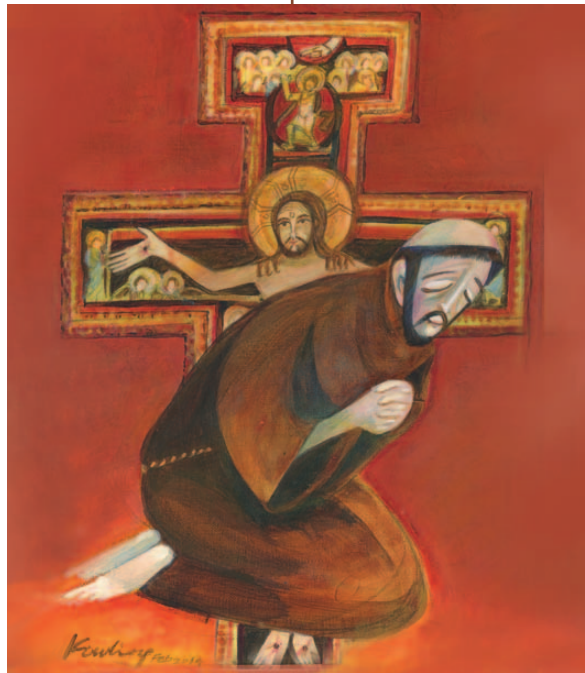
This context is important for understanding how Francis and Clare experienced their lives as religious and what eventually came to be known as Franciscan spirituality. Francis accepted **neither** the *monastic* form of spirituality nor the *apostolic* as they were being practiced in his time.<sup>2</sup> He did **not** use the “primitive community” of Acts as his model. **Nor** did he place primary emphasis on the *missionary discourse*. His stated purpose was “to live according to the form of the holy Gospel and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.” He sought to live what he understood to be the whole Gospel.

The Earlier Rule (1221) and the Later Rule (1223) of the friars and Francis’ “*Letter to All the Faithful*” (1215/1220) abundantly testify to his intentions.<sup>3</sup> In 1208, shortly after Francis heard the words of Luke’s Gospel 10:1-9 (L3C 25), he and his earliest companions opened the Gospels

to three different texts, all of which corroborated his original understanding (L3C 29). Further evidence that Francis emphasized the whole Gospel appears in passages from Thomas of Celano’s *Life of Saint Francis* (1C 84, 2C 209, 216). For Francis, the Word was primary, and by this he meant the whole Word, Jesus Christ. Hence his emphasis on “following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ” (2Ltf 13; LtOrd 51-52; LtL 3).

Around 1209, the pope gave provisional approval to Francis’ way of life “*according to the Gospel*” (1C 32-33). At that time, Francis promised obedience to the pope and accepted life according to the evangelical counsels. A new articulation of the *rule in 1221* indicated how he understood “*the observance of the Holy Gospel*.” Around that same time, in speaking before Innocent III, Francis used a beautiful analogy to explain his new way of life. He referred to himself as a woman in the desert made pregnant by the Word and giving birth to numerous children, both sons and daughters (2C 16).

Francis’ experience of life according to the Gospel focused on person as a living witness to the life of the Lord Jesus in its dynamic, creative, salvific, missionary, and contemplative dimensions. He understood this to be the evangelical life, the **Gospel life**. The Franciscan Order, then, understands itself as **one family of human persons encompassing the whole Gospel**.



## EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

Every experience of God is historically situated in the concrete, existential history of the subject. Such experiences express the subject in different historical moments in the Church's development, and the spirituality characteristic of each bears the mark of this historical location. To remain true to itself evangelical spirituality must take history seriously.

### How Francis Experienced God

It is clear that Francis experienced God's total transcendence. In the *Earlier Rule* (23:11), he speaks of God, Trinity and Unity, who is "without beginning and end, unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, praise worthy, glorious, exalted, sublime, most high, gentle, lovable, delightful and totally desirable above all else." In his first *Admonition*, Francis observes that "the Father dwells in inaccessible light, and God is Spirit, and no one has ever seen God" (5), an idea captured also in the *Cantic of the Creatures* with the phrase, "no human is worthy to mention Your name" (2). Furthermore, Francis experienced God's transcendence precisely as God's goodness. In the Praises of God to be said at all the hours of the divine office, he wrote:

*All-powerful, most holy, most high, supreme God: all good, supreme good, totally good, You who alone are good, may we give You all praise, all glory, all thanks, all honor, all blessing, and all good (11).*

What did Francis understand by goodness? Francis concretely experienced God's goodness as love, charity, wisdom, humility, justice, peace, moderation, beauty, and meekness. He understood God as protector, guardian, defender, strength, refreshment, hope, charity, faith, sweetness, and eternal life (see PrsG 3-6). In his own life, Francis experienced divine transcendence in the depth of God's protection, provision, and generosity. God provided Francis with divine inspiration, with faith in churches, and with a profound appreciation of the beauty of the universe. God also gave Francis brothers and every good thing. God consoled Francis in his troubles, gave him wealth in his poverty

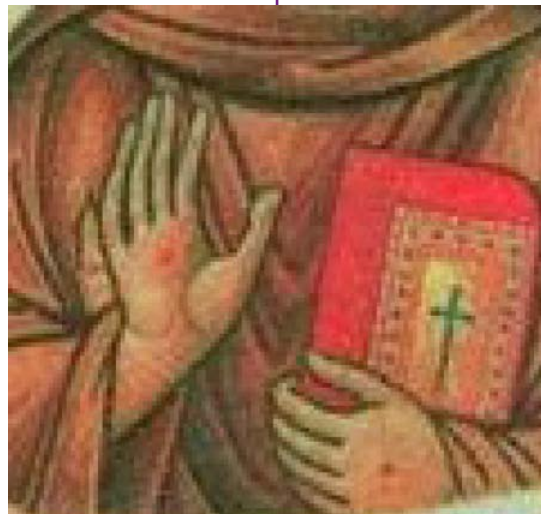
and, in his renunciation of marriage, gave him affection for all things living. Together with the experience of God's unknowability, Francis experienced enlightenment and sweetness. To Francis, the "little poor one," God was always simply gift (see ER 17:17-18; 2LtF 61; Adm 8:3, 12:2, 17:1, 18:2; LMj, chs. 5, 6, 7). And always, even when Francis experienced God as incomprehensible, he experienced God as good.

Also for Francis, God is Creator. In the *Earlier Rule* (23:1), he clearly stated: "You have created everything spiritual and corporal and, after making us in your own image and likeness, You placed us in paradise."



However, it is important to note the whole of chapter 23, for it gets to the very heart of the Franciscan experience.

It begins with the statement, "... We thank you for yourself, for through your holy will and through your only Son with the Holy Spirit, you have created everything. . . ." It is through the only Son that God creates the world. This idea is repeated in *Admonition* 5:1: "Consider, O human being, in what great excellence the Lord God has placed you, for he created you and formed you to the image of his beloved Son according to the body and to his likeness according to the Spirit." The reference is to the beginning of Genesis. The Franciscan tradition relies on this understanding when it speaks of the primacy of Christ in creation. It is one of the hallmarks of the theology of John Duns Scotus



and lies behind Bonaventure's own understanding of *vestigia*, the footprints of God in the world. Franciscan spirituality cannot move from God to the world without first contemplating Christ, through whom, in whom, and for whom the world was made. Christ is related not only to redemption but is radically related to creation. He is its summation and fulfillment. Creation and Incarnation are therefore intimately connected.

## Francis' Experience of the World

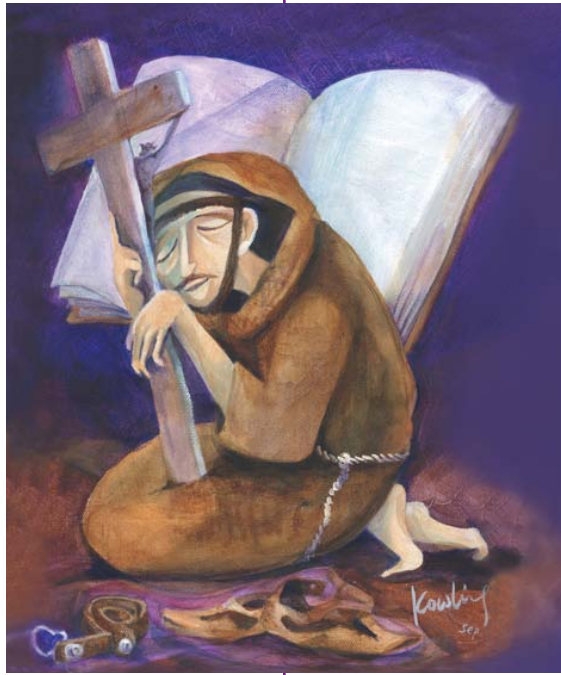
Understanding the Triune God as good-diffusing-itself, it is clear that at the root of its existence the world must be good. Made through Christ, it bears the marks of the Creator. Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures* witnesses to this, and the Earlier Rule (23:8) confirms it most eloquently, as does Thomas of Celano in the *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*:

This happy traveler, hurrying to leave this world as the exile of pilgrimage, was helped, and not just a little, by what is in the world. Toward the princes of darkness, he certainly used it as a field of battle. Toward God, however, he used it as the clearest mirror of goodness. In art, he praises the Artist; whatever he discovers in creatures, he guides to the Creator. He rejoices in all the works of the Lord's hands, and through their delightful display he gazes on their life-giving reason and cause. In beautiful things he discerns Beauty itself; all good things cry out to him: "*The One who made us is the Best,*" Following the footprints imprinted on creatures, he follows his Beloved everywhere; out of them all he makes for himself a ladder by which he might reach the Throne (165).

This vision of the Creator extends to everything: lights, lambs, cradles, rocks, wood, worms, and all animals. And because Francis recognized the Creator's love in all creatures, creatures returned his love (2C 166). Bonaventure's *Soul's Journey into God* is perhaps the most famous exposition of this insight.

This view of creation is most definitely medieval. Francis lived at a time of what Carroll Erickson calls "visionary imagination."<sup>4</sup> Theologically, studies of the medieval platonic universe and the nature of sacramentalism clearly delineate this understanding of the environment. According to the Franciscan vision, Scripture, nature, experience, and history are all books revealing God's goodness.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that Francis did not recognize sin and darkness in the world. He spoke of the world (*saeculum*) as a merchant would, pointing out its cares, anxieties, and vanities. He saw it as marked by avarice and the lure of riches. It is where one does things to be recognized, acts for rewards, strives to amass wealth,

and to take things for oneself — to fill a money bag. His most concrete example of behavior in the world is his description of the death of the avaricious man in the *Second Letter to the Faithful* (63-82). To be in the world is to be blind. Sin for Francis is related to what people do in the world and to the world. It is, above all, appropriation, taking to oneself what belongs to God, making a money bag out of one's own opinion (2C 140; Adm 4, 18; ER 8:7).



Francis described his conversion as "*leaving the world*" (Test 3). What does that mean? Simply, that he chose to live within the reality of God's gift. He saw the intrinsic structure and reality of the world, nature, people, and himself precisely as "gift." His task was to live within the context of this experience — to bear witness to it, to tell it what it truly is — God's gift impressed with the image of God's Son. Coming from the experience of his own conversion, this positive interpretation of all that is permeated his thinking and acting. His experience of having left the world was intimately related to his experience of sweetness. In the world of gift,

God is good and will provide. What then must evangelical persons do? — receive, give thanks, and bear witness to the Word in all its grandeur and goodness. While Francis was engaged in struggle with the world of blindness and sin, his struggle was not directed outwards, but inwards. It remained within the experience of gift. He did not perceive the world as a threat. Rather the threat was his own tendency to possessiveness.

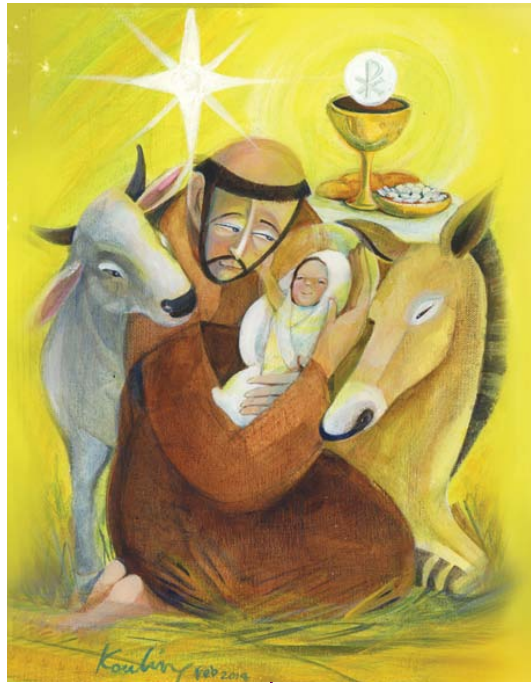
## Christ in the World of the Franciscan

Because the world was created through Christ, it was created in view of the Incarnation — a light that reveals the world to itself as existing from and for God, stamped with God's beauty and goodness. The Incarnation completes the world, brings it to fulfillment. Christ recapitulates all that is. Christ reveals to the world its own giftedness. By his life and death, he illuminates its deepest reality. The fact that all comes from the goodness of God and is to go back to that goodness is revealed through the reality of Jesus Christ "who made himself poor for our sakes" (2 Cor. 8:9, 2LtF 5; LR 6:3; 1C 76; 2C 73-74). *The Earlier Rule* describes this well:

*And they should not be ashamed, but rather recall that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living and all powerful God, set His face like flint, and was not ashamed. And He was a poor man and a transient and lived on alms, He and the Blessed Virgin, and His disciples (9:4).*

Christ redeems through his poverty and not through something extrinsic to his own humanity. He enters the world as a transient, a poor man, receiving his humanity from the womb of the Virgin. He re-establishes the reality, primacy, and experience of gift in the world by accepting the poverty of his humanness, by begging existence off the world's elements, totally dependent on the God who created the world as good. Jesus the poor one re-establishes faith and trust in God's goodness in the midst of his experience of poverty, rejection, persecution, and death. He is not a rich merchant selling the clothes of the kingdom to the poor. That would be an illusion, for the world is not poor. It is rich in God's goodness, image, and likeness. Jesus restores this understanding by becoming poor and relying on the abundance of the world to feed and clothe him. Jesus performs redeeming activity, not by giving but by receiving. Thus, he reveals God's goodness to the world and to its people. Franciscans, following in the footsteps of Christ, are to do the same. Thomas of Celano writes: *"Francis used to affirm that the Lesser Brothers had been sent from the Lord in these last times to show forth examples of light to those wrapped in the darkness of sins"* (2C 155).

It is only through the poor humanity of Christ that it is possible to enter the kingdom of God. This is the heart of Franciscan spirituality. By his poverty, his willingness to receive alms, Jesus gave us the right to be heirs of the kingdom (LR 6:4). While both apostolic spirituality and evangelical spirituality are rich in images of Christ, the



former emphasizes Christ as the one sent and the latter emphasizes Christ coming as a poor beggar.

### Francis' Experience of Church

Francis held before himself the image of the poor Christ and his poor mother (2C 85). He insisted that one who is not poor, one who cannot beg, makes a bad brother (2C 75). It is the poor person, the one willing to receive, who is the image of the Church. This connection is explicitly indicated in the *Salutation to the Blessed Virgin*:

*Hail, O Lady, holy Queen, Mary, holy Mother of God: Who are the virgin made church chosen by the most holy Father in heaven, whom he consecrated with his most holy beloved Son with the Holy Spirit the Paraclete, in whom there was and is all fullness of grace and every good (1-3).*

Later in this *Salutation*, Francis refers to Mary as "dwelling," or "house." It is the house that Francis is called to repair when he kneels in prayer before the crucifix at San Damiano. This "house" is also himself; it is the community; it is the Church; it is the world. Mary, out of whose flesh Jesus chose to be knit, is the example.

In the *Earlier Rule* (23:7), Francis clearly presents this understanding of the Church as embracing all peoples when he lists the different orders in the Church. Note that the list includes all human creatures: all ecclesiastical orders, the poor, all social orders, both sexes, all ages, *"all peoples everywhere on earth who are and who will be."* Every human creature is called to penance, to renounce sin, and to live in the world of gift. Franciscans are commissioned to *"ask and beg all those who wish to serve the Lord God within the holy, catholic, and apostolic church,"* and all these orders, to persevere in true faith and in penance. Such inclusivity functions here in terms of Francis' own new recognition. After he had left the

world, after he had kissed the leper and learned to beg, he discovered that he himself was poor, that he himself was brother.

Another way of looking at the difference between evangelical spirituality and apostolic spirituality is to see how each interprets the metaphor of “mother.” In apostolic spirituality, to be Church means to dedicate oneself to the salvation of the world. Thus the Church is by nature “maternal” and continually generates more Church. This maternal activity is called “pastoral” or “apostolic.” It impels the Church to a radical and operative realization of its sacramental emphasis. Those who live such a spirituality dedicate themselves to specific activities confided to them by the Church and exercised in its name.

For Francis, on the other hand, to be “mother” means to be willing to acknowledge one’s poverty and by this willingness receive. In this way, one generates sons and daughters.

Francis notes that we become mothers of Christ “*when we carry him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; we give him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example*” (2LtF 53). What is Christ’s holy activity? It is to be poor, like the Virgin made Church. The relationships between peoples are maternal precisely when people are willing to be poor enough to allow the other to enter their lives and change them (cf. ER 9:11; LR 6:8; LtL 1; 2C 137; RH).

It is in the sacrament of the Eucharist that the Church expresses its maternal aspect. For Francis, the Eucharist is not so much a sign of power as powerlessness; it communicates the redemption wrought by poverty. He writes:

*O sublime humility. O humble sublimity.  
The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God,  
so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides  
Himself under an ordinary piece of bread (LtOrd 27).*

He presents the same idea in his first *Admonition*.

*Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came  
from the royal throne into the Virgin’s womb; each day  
He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day  
He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the  
altar in the hands of a priest (Adm. 1:16-17).*

In the Franciscan experience, one turns to the brother or sister precisely because one is powerless, one is weak, one is poor, one is willing to be “*subject to all*,” to be knit at the hands of another, and thereby to shine out as an example that God is good. It is precisely the Eucharist and the redemptive strength of Jesus’ own humility that enables Franciscans to practice their way of life.<sup>6</sup>

## “The Prophetic Heart”

In terms of the poetics of the evangelical life in the context of American culture, among the challenges lies in our discovering a way of speaking about God which opens up to the human desire for the truly beautiful, the joyful, the affectionate, and the free . . .

We need to develop:

- ◆ A poetics of love
- ◆ A politics of how to live together, and
- ◆ A pedagogy of spiritual wisdom.

Above all, can we develop more faith in God’s presence in ourselves?

Can we open up the experience of God-with-us for all our fellow citizens in their call to be human?

Keynote Address, 29th Annual Federation Conference, Chicago, August 31, 1994. Also in *The CORD*, November 1994: 44.11 (292-306)

In a culture where memory is at a premium, we need to appropriate our own development of the evangelical life even more deeply. We can do this, I think, by practicing a prophetic action of the **affirmation of the good.**

We have all been participants in something very good.

***Releasing Energies to Love:  
Creative Fidelity in the Church***

*The CORD* 62:2. Oct/Dec 2012 (370-394)





*Christ wants to knit with our humanity something for the world, something for others.*

*Is our world becoming larger?  
Is our love becoming greater?*

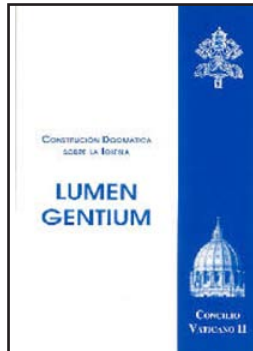
**Franciscan Evangelical spirituality** is perfectly consonant with the teachings of Vatican Council II. *Lumen Gentium* (1, 8) notes:

By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity. . . . Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path in communicating to all the fruits of salvation. . . . Thus, although the Church needs human resources to carry out her mission, she is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim humility and self-sacrifice, even by her own example.

In this passage the Council couples together Philippians 2:6 and 2 Corinthians 8:9, the latter of which was a vital text for Francis.

In its vision of the world, the Council indicates a path for modern Franciscans. *Nostra Aetate* stresses what people have in common — the theme of light, the values of the world, universal brotherhood/sisterhood (1, 2, 5). The Church recognizes that it is precisely in view of its own humanity that it is united to the whole world. *Dignitatis Humanae* argues for the dignity of all people, baptized and unbaptized. It pictures Christ as one who bears witness to the truth through his meekness, humility, patience, and human attractiveness. “He showed Himself the perfect Servant of God,” and brought revelation to completion (11). *Unitatis Reintegratio* presents the Church as “God’s only flock, [which] like a standard lifted high for the nations to see, ministers the gospel of peace to all mankind as she makes her pilgrim way in hope toward her goal, the fatherland above” (2).

But it is *Gaudium et Spes* that presents the most systematic approach. It highlights the witnessing function of the Church, the values of the world, the Church’s participation in the world, the



mutual interrelatedness of the Church and the world, and what the Church receives from the world. It portrays Christ as the New Person, the Alpha and Omega (1, 11, 12, 21, 22, 40, 43-45). **These selections demonstrate that evangelical spirituality finds roots in Vatican II. Franciscans, as practitioners of this spirituality, have something to offer the modern world.**

## Particular Aspects of Evangelical Spirituality



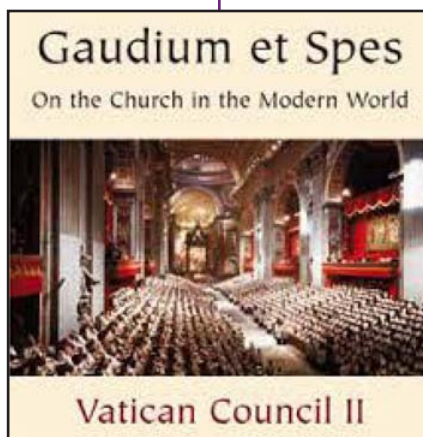
*The most profound movement in the evangelical life*

*Is the desire to live*

*In the world of exchange.*

In examining ecclesial spiritualities, there is a tendency to focus on particular apostolic works based on an understanding of Christ in mission coupled with an acknowledgement that no one person or congregation can integrate all aspects of the Gospel. There may be an emphasis on “different types of charity” and a push to professionalism. This is not true, however, in the Franciscan experience. **Franciscans tend to believe that any work is religious provided the person who performs it is “in penance.” And, for Francis and the friars, to be “in penance” was to live the Gospel in simplicity and joy, offering others good example by life and word.** The brothers performed manual labor and engaged in domestic service in the homes of lay persons in order to support themselves. They preached, taught, and stayed among outcasts, lepers, and those “*by the side of the road*” (ER 9:2). For Franciscans, then, no particular work characterizes them. The works they engage in are determined by the gifts and capabilities of the various individuals, and the center of their life is the Holy Gospel. **The notion of a single apostolic work (or even two or three) was never at the heart of the Franciscan experience. Franciscan spirituality begins with the person and his or her call to penance.**<sup>7</sup>

Once again, we note the influence of the **historical moment** in shaping a spirituality. The Franciscan experience was born during the time of the rise of the individual and the commune, the development of new technical methodologies, and the growth of cities. It focused on the person. One of the strongest testimonies to this approach is Francis’ *Letter to Anthony*. Francis, a simple and unlettered person, calls the learned Anthony “my bishop” and identifies the “spirit of holy prayer and devotion” as the key to the Franciscan





character. *The evangelical life, entrusted especially to Franciscans by the Church, presupposes a deep awareness of the unity between nature, grace, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the individual person.*

## Apostolic Activity

Franciscans understand that their mission to live the Gospel is always done in relationship to the pope, the bishops, and the local church. While the service of preaching was entrusted to the early friars, it was regulated by the hierarchy, and not all the friars were given this assignment. Francis always maintained an attitude of deference towards the clergy. Thomas of Celano describes how Francis placed himself under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Assisi (1C 15). He also went to Rome to seek approbation of his evangelical way of life (1C 32, LR 1; 12:3-4; Test 15). Because heretical groups were causing much difficulty at the time, Francis insisted on orthodoxy among the friars (ER 2:12; 19:1-2; LR 2:2). The Order was careful to promote the decisions and directives of the fourth Lateran Council held in 1215.

Francis and Clare, however, experienced Church as something that existed beyond the hierarchy. They understood it as the people of God. Clare testified to an interaction between obedience to the hierarchy, community, and poverty in her Rule, approved by the pope just before her death in 1253.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to ministering to the poor, the Franciscan experience stems from the medieval notion that the poor are sacraments of Christ. Francis came back to this idea again and again. He noted that the one who curses a poor man injures Christ (1C 76). He saw in the poor the image of the Lord and his poor mother (2C 85). Consequently, the early friars lived among the “poor, powerless, sick, lepers, beggars by the wayside” (ER 9:2). Francis did not stand over against the world or make an option for it. Rather, he was **in it**, a position that stems in large measure from his conversion experience (Test 1-3). **He lived in the experience of the gift. His action in the world was based not so much on the world’s needs but on his awareness of being himself a gift, a shining example of God’s goodness to all.**



*Evangelical work is making available to others the enjoyment of God.*

## Distinctive Experiences of Obedience

Francis and Clare also had a distinctive way of understanding obedience within the community. (See ER 4, 5, 6; LR, 8, 10; SalV 14; Adm 2, 3, 4.) Francis coupled obedience with charity.<sup>9</sup> In considering obedience, one

of the key ideas was that all friars are “subject,” including ministers and prelates; all are “minor.” This understanding of obedience comes out clearly in directives concerning community chapters, the election of ministers and abbes, and the importance of person. The brotherhood/sisterhood is always directed towards the person, who, in turn, gives an example of the evangelical life. It is to this that all members must witness. All are brothers and sisters. This fundamental reality is explained in light of the poverty of Christ. Unless this is understood and taken into account, the obedience of love cannot be sufficiently probed.<sup>10</sup> The Franciscan spiritual experience comes from the person of Christ, through whom the world is being created, and moves towards the person of Christ, in whom is the fullness of life and the completion and reconciliation of the world. Thus, what binds the community together is obedience to its commitment to live “according to the form of the Holy Gospel.”



*Our essential ministry is the relationship of sisters and brothers, expressed in our 1) common experience of God, 2) commitment to the world of exchange, 3) prayer together, 4) responsibility for one another.*

Experiencing the Spirit of the Lord at work within them, the brothers and sisters recognize that this is what creates the personal ties that unite them. The Spirit takes the initiative and leads them to each other by divine inspiration (ER 2:1), and they are called to express together this life of the Spirit (see ER 17:9-16). Liturgical prayer, the obedience of love, brotherhood and sisterhood, and hospitality too, stem from this. The Spirit creates a community of persons who are pilgrims and strangers. As itinerants they are not bound by a common place (cloister) or a common work. In the Spirit, they are free.<sup>11</sup>

## Prophetic Character

*The Franciscan spiritual experience has a deeply prophetic character. As a penitent, Francis ushered in the Kingdom, became a brother to all, and anticipated the end time. In fact, the very idea of poverty in his day carried social and theological implications related to the end time. What he was forming was a *novus ordo*. His experience, as well as that of Clare, challenged contemporary society — its understanding of peace and war, its classification of the poor, and its economic attitudes and structures. The question for Francis was not whether action was prophetic, but how it was prophetic.*



A clear understanding of the Franciscan experience of “prophetic action” can be gained by examining Francis’ challenge to the notion of “crusade” as it was being practiced in both Church and state.<sup>12</sup> When Francis went to the Orient in 1220, he found the crusading parties deeply divided. He himself refused to act as a crusader, understanding that his mission carried no political or diplomatic meaning. He crossed over enemy lines without arms and with no advantage of diplomatic authority. Before the Sultan, he declared simply that he was a Christian. His action was one of “attestation” not “contestation.”<sup>13</sup> Totally a person of the Spirit, Francis lived from the world of gift. Saying “no” to nothing, he said “yes” to *evangelical life*.

The *Earlier Rule* (16:5-7) described Francis’ manner of prophetic action. He instructed the brothers on how they were to go among the Saracens and other unbelievers. They might live among them spiritually in two ways: “*One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians.*” This first way, linked to true obedience, waits totally on God’s good pleasure. Francis went to the Sultan as a poor person, subject to all, believing that none could have power over him unless it was “*given to them from above*” (SalV 14). The link with the beggar Christ could not be more evident. Francis had learned that all is gift. His humanity led him to accept all peoples as brothers and sisters, fellow beggars waiting on God’s good pleasure.

The **second way** of living spiritually among unbelievers is to proclaim the word of God when they see that it pleases the Lord so that they [the unbelievers] believe in the all-powerful God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — the Creator of all, and in the Son, Who is the Redeemer and Savior, and that they be baptized and

become Christians; because whoever has not been born again of water and the Holy Spirit cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

Francis’ witness in the world was prophetic. It was evangelical. He was willing to accept the consequences of his actions. He refused to utter “no.” His prophetic action was one with his experience of God as good and of Jesus as the one through whom the world was made, the one who redeems by his poverty. This was Francis’ way of ushering in the kingdom of God.

Francis’ posture was animated by unity between action and contemplation. The mendicant Francis does not have contact with the world only in function of ministry and service. His experience of poverty does not result from awareness of the vast areas of human needs to be met. He does not relate to the world because of a call to apostolic activity. Rather, Francis is simply in the world — it is his cloister. Clare, for her part, does not relate to a world “out there,” but understands that the world is already in her monastery because the world is a fellow creature. Thus, Francis and Clare realize that they are brother and sister to all.

Francis’ radical experience of poverty, of being a human creature, reveals to him that he is united to God precisely through his own inadequacy. The more he releases control, the more God lives. The more he lives from this experience, the more the world experiences the kingdom. Francis does not discuss the unity of action and contemplation. It is his experience in the world that is a source of unity with God. The world, both in its goodness and in its poverty, reveals

God; it is a source of contemplation. Praxis reveals gift. Francis and Clare both find themselves to be in the image and likeness of Christ. It is this reality in the depths of their experience that makes prayer and action one.



This profound understanding of prayer in Francis and Clare is related to their fundamental anthropology, which is clearly elaborated in the Earlier Rule (Ch. 22). The category they use to understand prayer is “person,” the person of Christ and the Virgin. Francis experiences himself as a womb, a cell, a dwelling place, a house. (See 2C 16, 94-95.)

While there is an external rhythm in Francis’ life between times of contemplation in solitude and times of contemplation in activity, there is no radical break. To ask medieval persons such as Francis and Clare how they understand the relationship between action and contemplation is to ask the wrong question. For them, unity lies in the experience of creature-hood. Francis’ whole life after his conversion was characterized by illuminative and unitive experiences.



He was, like the Virgin, a tabernacle, a dwelling, a robe, a servant, a mother (SalBVM, 4-5). This anthropology and understanding of nature distinguish the evangelical spiritual tradition from the apostolic.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was not to present a thorough exposition of the evangelical religious experience or spirituality. The point has been simply to highlight how I have personally experienced some significant differences between the evangelical spirituality as mediated by Francis and Clare and what I understand to be apostolic spirituality.

Obviously, there is much more that can be said, but I hope this helps us reflect on some significant dimensions that may affect our own understandings and our own renewal in the Spirit.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See M. D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
- <sup>2</sup> See Cajetan Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1970) and Duane Lapsanski, *Evangelical Perfection* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1977).
- <sup>3</sup> All references to the writings of Francis are from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3 volumes, ed. Regis Armstrong, OFM Cap, Wayne Hellmann, OFM Conv, and William Short, OFM (New York: New City Press, 1999, 2000, 2001).
- <sup>4</sup> See Carroll Erickson, *The Medieval Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
- <sup>5</sup> See Dominique Gagnon, “Francis and the Book of Nature,” *Etudes Franciscaines* (1972-73).
- <sup>6</sup> See David Flood, OFM, *Frère François et le Mouvement Franciscain* (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1983), 171-172.
- <sup>7</sup> See Vicente Mateos, OFM, “El Trabajo Y La Primitiva Experiencia Franciscana,” *Selecciones de Franciscanismo*, (198): 183-190; David Flood, *Frère François*; Cajetan Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order*.
- <sup>8</sup> See Ignatius Brady, *Legend and Writings of Clare of Assisi* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1953).
- <sup>9</sup> The primary Scripture texts he relied on were Mt. 7:12; 20:25-28, Lk. 22:26, Gal. 5:13.
- <sup>10</sup> Fundamental studies in this area have been done by M. D. Chenu, “Fraternitas, Evangile et condition socioculturelle,” *Revue d’Histoire de la Spiritualité*, 49 (1973), 385-400 and Cajetan Esser, *De Obedientia-Auctoritate ad Mentem S.P.N. Francisci*, mss. copy. See also Regis Armstrong, “The Service of Loving Obedience,” *The Cord*, (July – August, 1982): 195-208.
- <sup>11</sup> Further information on this can be found in Cajetan Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order*, 156-172.
- <sup>12</sup> Francis de Beer elaborates this in *We Saw Brother Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983).
- <sup>13</sup> De Beer, *We Saw Brother Francis*.



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With a D.Phil from Oxford University, Joe authored the ground-breaking work, *Living Stones: The History and Structure of Catholic Spiritual Life in the United States*, as well as significant studies on the history of prayer and the reception of Vatican II in the U.S. Joe Chinnici's Orbis 2010 book *When Values Collide: The Catholic Church Sexual Abuse, and the Challenges of Leadership* was awarded *First Place* for Pastoral Ministry by the Catholic Press Association in 2011. Once launched, CFIT sponsored over eight editions of *The Franciscan Heritage Series* (2003-2012) with Joe as General Editor.

In 2013 the Franciscan Institute published *The Franciscan Moral Vision: Responding to God's Love*. This milestone was eight years in preparation spearheaded by Joe Chinnici and edited by Thomas Nairn OFM. A Forum and Franciscan Federation keynote addresses soon followed. THE FORUM DVD PROGRAM with Presentations by Tom Nairn OFM, Mary Beth Ingham CSJ and Joe Chinnici OFM is available. Contact: Kathleen Moffatt OSF at [moffatt.kathleen@comcast.net](mailto:moffatt.kathleen@comcast.net).

2021 saw the publication of Joe's masterful study, *American Catholicism Transformed: From the Cold War through the Council*. Oxford University Press, NY, On December 16, 1998, Pope John Paul II addressed the O.F.M.s encouraging them to *intensify the enthusiasm and generosity of service to the Church with a great and neverchanging fidelity to the spirit of your origins*. Pope John Paul II must have met Joseph P. Chinnici, OFM.



**SYNTHESIZED by Elise Saggau, OSF**, Franciscan Sister of Little Falls, MN has served the Franciscan Family most especially as assistant director of publications at the Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University where for six years she was also editor of *The CORD*, the monthly Franciscan spiritual review. With M.A. degrees in Religious Education (Seattle University), Divinity (Loyola University, Chicago), and Franciscan Studies (Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University NY), Elise's ministry experiences also include leadership in her congregation, pastoral life, retreat director, together with education as assistant dean for students at St. John's University School of Theology in Collegeville, MN. Elise has taught theology at Loyola University, Mundelein College in Chicago, and at the Spiritan Missionary College

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